Oxford Chamber Music Society

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Felix MENDELSSOHN 1809-1847
Trio for piano, violin and cello no 1 in d minor, opus 49

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1. Molto allegro ed agitato 2. Andante con moto tranquillo
3. Scherzo: Leggiero e vivace 4. Finale: Allegro assai appassionato

In the period after Beethoven's death in 1827 German music was struggling for a new confidence. Keen to populate his own era with major chamber works, Mendelssohn drafted his first and most famous (but the better?) of his two piano trios during a summer 1839 stay in Frankfurt – a break with his wife Cécile and baby son Carl from the Herculean task of reforming the entire musical life of Leipzig: we must remember as a practical musician Mendelssohn's encompassing energy verged on the superhuman – except he wore himself down to an early death. In the following September the work was revised, famously taking (hardly disinterested) advice from his composer/conductor/pianist friend Ferdinand Hiller and introducing techniques developed from Chopin and Liszt into the piano part – or as Hiller put it, *the richness of passages which marked the new piano school* – but leaving just about everything else intact. Musicians still make the wry comment that the trio is more like a piano concerto, but in fact even with the piano at its most thunderous Mendelssohn, a superb craftsman, saw to it that the strings could always be heard. Another friend, Schumann, wearing his critic's hat, could hardly contain himself: he proclaimed him *as the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most brilliant of musicians, the one who most clearly sees the contradictions of the age, and the first to reconcile them*; Mendelssohn, he said, *had written the master trio of the age.*

… old rules and new instincts

Agitato – appassionato: the markings certainly signal high-flying emotions in the waiting. There is no doubt we are in the new Romantic world as nervous syncopated piano chords animate the opening theme of the first movement, launched with Italianate ardour by the cello and then passed to the violin. In an extended and increasingly muscular transition do listen for the counter motif high on the violin, then the piano, a lovely idea all but thrown away. It is a curtain for the arrival of the second subject on the cello, shamelessly sunny and songlike. The piano, mopping its brow, is allowed a little romance before another amphetamine gulp and a headlong plunge into the development. This is a kind of double act: it repeats the exposition as it develops its material, but with enlarged treatment of the second subject. The recapitulation has changes too: I don't need to catalogue them, but there's more melodic writing for the piano. But cue the coda: no longer benign, the piano brews a storm and blows the music along to a dramatic, decisive – but still D minor – conclusion. The extraordinary success of this movement is around Mendelssohn's containment of its emotional charge in a taut, disciplined but in its way innovatory structure – the tension between old rules and new instincts, the *contradictions of his time*; the mighty legacy of Beethoven, and what to do with it.

… cusped and blown by ceaseless semiquavers

Although there are dissenters, I think these days we have a very balanced view of Mendelssohn. For some, you see, Mendelssohn committed the sin of being happy in the skin of his time, of living the kind of blessed life which just couldn't produce great music. No myth could ever be attached to him, unlike the glowering Ludwig van, as perpetuated into the last century by Antoine Bourdelle's sculpted busts, one with the appearance of a windscorched meteor (I call it the 'Bourdelle Boulder'). Compare any representation of Mendelssohn: it speaks oceans. To mangle Eliot's *Prufrock*, Mendelssohn was not Beethoven, *nor was meant to be*. So what do we have in the second movement? It's a *song without words*, but surely no longer deserving our 'carpet-slipper-music' condescension. It is most beautifully crafted, and sits within this work as well as the movement after it. A lovely, unpretentious theme – a lullaby – is divided, each part sung by the piano and then by violin and cello. A central section offers a minor key variant, and a perfectly judged intensification. A decorated version of the first part, complete with mini-cadenzas for the strings near the close, rounds it all off in a way to enchant its composer's audience. And what's wrong with that? The Scherzo exudes a different magic, that of Mendelssohn's world of fairies and goblins: puckish, cheeky; I even see the poking of elfish tongues at us at one point. The piano

perkily opens with the dominant theme which mischievously scatters and fragments, cusped and blown by the ceaseless semiquavers. Starting with the Goethe-inspired mischief in the Octet (in our series on 22nd April 2018), written when he was sixteen as a birthday present for his violin teacher, such music was his special creation and has always been valued, even causing those who wished to silence his music in a shameful Germany to almost bite their tongues. The rondo finale is also all but a *moto perpetuo* dance of joy, bounding along with a dactylic rhythm (one long, two short beats) for two of the main themes, the first adorned with another throwaway violin counter-melody. For the third the retiring cello has its moment in the sun and duets with the violin in a fulsome *cantilena*, the work's third migrant from Italy. The piano finally calls them to heel, and we go through the merriment again, including the *cantilena (Loudly and sweetly)*, marking a switch from D minor to joyful major, with the piano, in virtuoso mode throughout this movement, stampeding to the final triumphant flourish.

Johannes BRAHMS 1833-1897
Trio in C major for piano, violin and cello, opus 87

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1. Allegro 2. Andante con moto 3. Scherzo: Presto 4. Finale: Allegro giocoso

Despite the efforts of such composers as Mendelssohn, Spohr and Schumann, the struggle to rebuild and renew the abstract structures of German music after Beethoven reached a decisive peak with Brahms, and arguably in chamber music itself with this very trio. He started the work in March 1880, but did not complete it until June 1882, when he was holidaying in the Salzkammergut, at Bad Ischl. He was at the height of his powers, and success, and in 1878 symbolically grew his famous beard: one nudge-wink wag said he (Brahms) had now stopped looking like Clara Schumann's son and had become her father (rumours about their relationship were rife). Mind you, Clara had noted his deteriorating piano technique: *Brahms plays more and more abominably. It is now nothing but bump, bang and scrabble*. Anyway, he was immensely proud of his trio, writing to his publisher: *You have not yet had such a beautiful trio from me and very likely have not published its equal in the last ten years.*

… an ending which brooks no argument

Read any commentator on the opening of the first movement, and you will most likely come across the word *Olympian* – and who could dissent? The first

movement is rewardingly rich in ideas, comparable in this respect to Mozart's Piano Quartets. The strings, borne up by the piano, announce the first theme in leaping octaves, always upwards, before dramatic rising arpeggios land on C major and an emphatic reiteration of the majesty of the opening, now a full octave higher. The tension dies down, 'swoons', for the piano to gently announce the oh-so-lyrical second subject. The music sinks into a deep reverie – listen to the theme in octave strings – but this is broken by dance-like music from the strings and then piano. All tension drops away – then suddenly tightens for what seems like an exposition repeat. But no – after a few bars we realise we are plunged into the development section. This is quite short, and you should listen for the little string duet, the piano rippling away in triplets, with the opening transformed into a waltz; this will later introduce the coda. The recapitulation, in a sense, becomes orderly development. From the point of stillness which before marked the 'false recapitulation' the restless coda grows, silenced by an ending which brooks no argument.

… one of the greatest and warmest of all Brahms' melodies

The Andante is cast as five variations, but on a double theme, for the piano syncopated off-beats have a life of their own, especially in the third and fourth variations. The theme 'proper' has a strong Magyar flavour, complete with a 'Scotch snap', here the pronounced skip of a semiquaver and dotted crotchet. The first four variations are locked in the theme's structure, including the last seven bars (a four-bar phrase and its inversion).This feeling of compression adds to a pronounced feeling of Stoic mournfulness, which seems to haunt all but the third variation, with its strong gipsy flavour, and the last, where the theme is at last released in a most fitting conclusion to a singularly beautiful movement. The C minor scherzo might seem unblushingly Mendelssohn-like, but is darker and colder, all will-o'-the-wisps and winds through the reeds and across chill waters. It is a nightmare of *pianissimo* delicacy for our players, especially the pianist. The C major trio, though, is one of the greatest and warmest of all Brahms' melodies. As for the 'joke' finale, it is a hybrid of sonata, rondo and theme and variations, and is huge fun. Even the accompaniment to the dominant rondo theme, as heard at the beginning, becomes a detached element. Enjoy: writing and reading about it is quite unnecessary. The C major ending should lift anyone's November spirits.

Maurice RAVEL 1875-1937
Trio for piano, violin and cello in A minor

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1. Modéré 2. Pantoum. Assez vif 3. Passacaille. Très large 4. Finale: Animé

The Trio, whose first theme has a Basque flavour, was composed entirely in 1914, at St-Jean de Luz. Let us take two key elements from this laconic comment written by Ravel for a recording company (if only your scribe could match such economy). The composer had a *Basque* mother, to whom he was almost obsessively devoted. He was born in the fishing village of Ciboure, in the Basque part of France, just across the River Neville from St-Jean, itself well south of Biarritz on the Bay of Biscay. Although he composed the best 'Spanish' music (even Manuel de Falla said so), Ravel never made the short crossing over the border. *1914*, of course, was a fateful year. He began the trio in March, but had to leave St-Jean for a period mid-year. By the time he returned the church bells were ringing out to announce the beginning of mobilisation. He tried to enlist in the air force but had to settle for being a lorry driver because of his small stature. But he witnessed action, including Verdun, and the grim memories of what he saw never left him.

… the piano tolls from another world

But how can one write about the first movement? It is in sonata form, but a rethinking of such sheer beauty and atmosphere one may think sorcery was at work. The modal themes which are its building blocks were almost certainly memories of old Basque songs his mother had once sung to him. We hear the piano first, and the *Basque flavour* is immediately provided by the mysterious rocking 5/8 dance rhythm of the *zortzico* on the piano, which then gently sets alight the octaves of violin and cello. A summer breeze courses through the music – there is even a squall – but we finally come to the second subject, with no change of key – pure aural magic with the strings as if indeed spellbound, while the piano tolls as if from another world. More fluid writing (the development) reminds me for all the world of the paintings of his water-lily garden at Giverny Claude Monet was working on at the same time. We know the recapitulation when we hear the *zortzico*, again on the piano, another squall, and then a glowing pool of fluctuating harmonies and tempi, with the *zortzico* like a dark shadow, finally dying away with the last flickers of dusk.

… a dance of interlocking cogs and wheels

And now – a complete change as we spring open the little box which made Stravinsky quip that Ravel *was the most perfect of Swiss watchmakers* – after his mother's songs, it's now his father's bequest: he was an engineer and inventor. In this true *tour de force* we hear an appropriation of the structure of the pantum, or *pantoun*, an esoteric Malay verse form which had attracted some exotically-minded French nineteenth century poets. Baudelaire, no less, created the best known adaptation in *Harmonie du soir (Les Fleurs du mal 47)*. Here Ravel attempted to recreate in sound the pantun's essential 'mechanism' – the working of two parallel ideas (thus the two thematic motifs), with a rhyming scheme in which the second and third lines of one quatrain become the first and fourth of the next – all to create a delightful scherzo and trio, a dance of interlocking cogs and wheels.

… huge piano chords against trilling strings

Without the tensions and anxieties after the outbreak of war, we would not be listening to the same two final movements of this trio, completed in St-Jean-de-Luz in September. The third movement is another old form, the baroque passacaglia, a series of variations on a ground bass: the over-structure is that of an arch. The theme is introduced at the bottom of the piano, and then in similarly low registers of cello and finally violin. It all amounts little by little to such a peak of intensity (and Ravel was no heart-on-sleeve subscriber) we can only believe that the composer's dread of war, articulated so forcefully in his letters, is what is being expressed here. Deeply melancholy, the variations sink away into darkness. The *Finale* can be seen as a counter to the despair of the *Passacaille*: its two themes, one again Basque in character, carry a mood of defiance, the three instruments expanding in sonority with huge piano chords against trilling strings (hints of battles-to-come?), but the surging coda may carry brave hope rather than hard conviction. We know from his correspondence that Ravel feared this music might be his swan-song. After the first two movements, it's as if the world had turned on its axis.

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