

*Chamber Music Unbound presents:*

**CONCERTS with the FELICI PIANO TRIO**

January 22 & 23, 2022

Cerro Coso College, Mammoth Lakes & Bishop

*Program*

**Sergey Rachmaninoff (1873-1943)**

Trio Élégiaque for Piano Trio

*Lento lugubre*

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Piano Trio in B-Flat Major, opus 97, "Archduke"

*Allegro moderato*

*Scherzo: Allegro*

*Andante cantabile*

*Allegro moderato*

Sergey Rachmaninoff was the last great representative of Russian Romanticism in the tradition of Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky. He was not a child prodigy, but he had grown-up in a musical family and began to compose early, during his years of piano studies at the Moscow Conservatory. His piano professor was Nikolay Zverev, and Sergey lived at his house. Zverev was a relentless disciplinarian, and the teenager's keen interest in composition, which Zverev considered a waste of time, actually led to a break between the two. Nevertheless, a bit later in life, Rachmaninoff granted Zverev with instilling in him the work ethic that had made him one of the most sought after performers of his day.

Rachmaninoff completed his piano studies at the tender age of nineteen, graduating with honors from the Conservatory. During the summer of 1891, he finished his first piano concerto at Ivanovka, the country estate of his relatives, the Satin family. where he would spend most summers until 1917. Upon his return to Moscow in the fall he embarked on his final year of composition studies and wrote, amongst other works, his first piano trio. The word "Élégiaque" in its title gives away the young composer's source of inspiration as Tchaikovsky's trio opus 50, with its first movement entitled "Pezzo Elegiaco". Rachmaninoff's graduation work was a one-act opera, *Aleko*, based on a poem by Pushkin. He was awarded the highest possible honor, the Great Gold Medal, previously awarded to only two other graduates.

It is clear from the short, yet profound *Trio Élégiique* that this was not a young composer producing student exercises, but rather a “Free Artist” - the official title bestowed on him by the conservatory upon graduation - at work. What makes this trio an early masterwork is Rachmaninoff’s ability to reflect upon the essence of the human experience - from a thoroughly Russian perspective. From the germinal opening in which the strings meander back and forth between just two pitches, to the funeral march in the end, this single movement rises and then falls again in a big melodic arch that is filled with musical ideas representing the realms of emotion, intellect and nature, respectively.

After short spells of living and working in Dresden and Paris, Rachmaninoff left Russia for good in the wake of the revolution of 1917. In November 1918 the family of four, with wife Natalya Satina and two daughters, arrived in New York, and the composer now concentrated on performing to guarantee their livelihood. In 1921, the Rachmaninoffs bought a house where they consciously re-created “the atmosphere of Ivanovka”. But in spite of his busy schedule performing solo recitals and appearing as conductor and piano soloist with all major American orchestras over the next two decades, the composer remained homesick, and spent little time composing. When his doctor advised him to move to a warmer climate, the family relocated to California, where they lived in close proximity to Horowitz and Stravinsky. Rachmaninoff passed away at his home in Beverly Hills in March 1943.

The following are the composer’s own words in an effort to describe his music:

*I am a Russian composer, and the land of my birth has inevitably influenced my temperament and outlook. My music is the product of my temperament, and therefore it is Russian music. I never consciously attempt to write ‘Russian’ music, or any other kind of music, for that matter. I have been strongly influenced by Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, but I have never consciously imitated anybody. I try to make my music express simply and directly whatever fills my heart at the time I am composing. If there is love there, or bitterness, or sadness, or religion, these emotions become part of my music, and it becomes either beautiful, or bitter, or sad, or devout. For composing music is as much a part of my life as is breathing and eating. I compose music because I must give expression to my feelings, just as I talk because I must give utterance to my thoughts.*

- Notes by Rebecca Hang

The year 1810 saw a marked slowdown of the pace of composition with which **Ludwig van Beethoven** produced new music. It continued well into 1811, during which he completed only one major work, our “Archduke Trio”, which he put to paper between March 3 and March 26. Not that he was not busy: Beethoven was working on several commissions for incidental music to three stage works. But something was going on in his life that distracted him from immersing himself into the kind of deep creative exploration that yields timeless masterworks.

The famous sequence of letters to Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved" might be a clue as to what might have been at the root of his distractedness during that time. We know that by his late thirties, and especially after securing the annuity that he was granted by three of his patrons in Vienna, he felt that he had reached sufficient financial security to allow him to start a family. But the woman of his heart's choice, who is now widely believed to have been Antonie Brentano, was married. The only one of many love interests in Beethoven's life who actually reciprocated his feelings, Antonie was not free, and Beethoven's words are an honest (and deeply moving) reflection of his internal moral conflict, which eventually led to renunciation.

At this crossroads, Beethoven's life took the irrevocable turn toward self-sufficiency and inwardness that ultimately prevailed against his longing for love. On his work table he kept an ancient Egyptian inscription: "He is of himself alone, and it is to this aloneness that all things owe their being." Whether this inscription had theological or personal implications to him, we don't know, probably both. It certainly makes for a fitting description of the self image of the creative artist at the turn to the nineteenth century, and of Beethoven as a pioneer of the Romantic movement.

Our opus 97 piano trio, Beethoven's last completed work in this genre, anticipates and expresses both this renunciation and aloneness as a prerequisite to his creativity, and it is in this work that he actually embraces this state - before he does so in his relationship.

In the course of over 200 years, the *Trio opus 97* has lost nothing of its relevance or mystery. Beethoven, as a young adult, had embraced the revolutionary ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity, and he searched to express them in his music, as we can see in the three trios that make up his opus 1. At the height of his fame in Vienna, 14 years later, Beethoven completed the two trios opus 70 which summarized the achievements of the Classical style. With the "Archduke", composed in 1810, he is leading the way in a strong turn to subjectivity and the search for inner truths, which would become the stylistic hallmark of the Romantic movement.

While it might seem ironic that most of the young revolutionary's supporters in Vienna were members of the high nobility, we should not forget that the Enlightenment, as well as the bloodbath in France, had already effected a change of attitude, at least in German speaking lands. An enlightened nobleman understood that the contentment of his subjects depended on the benevolence and wisdom of his rule, and many a prince, duke, or count proceeded to implement a number of social reforms. An enlightened nobleman or -woman also not only could tolerate, but even respect Beethoven's claim to *his* nobility; not of birth, but of the spirit.

Certainly, the young Archduke Rudolph von Habsburg did. His father Leopold II had, in his brief rule of the Empire, already shown to be an enlightened monarch. Rudolph had chosen the 33 year-old Beethoven to be his piano and composition teacher at the age of fifteen, and the two would remain close friends to the end of the composer's life. The relationship between the noble student and the artist-teacher was marked by mutual respect, even

devotion. Beethoven depended for long stretches of time on Rudolph's loyal patronage - and at the same time, it seems that the young nobleman deeply appreciated the not-so-common commoner's willingness to share his unique gifts in the intimate setting that is musical instruction. Rudolph was ordained at age 17, thus becoming a clergyman of the Catholic Church, while at the same time being Prince Royal of Hungary and Bohemia. Beethoven remained Rudolph's teacher until 1824 and dedicated a total of 14 works to him, amongst the best, our trio that would eventually bear the dedicatee's title.

The "Archduke" trio has provoked much speculation because it stands out from other masterpieces in the chamber music genre of the period by virtue of its visionary quality: Beethoven anticipates in this work many of the textural, rhythmic and harmonic features of later musical styles. You can hear snippets that forecast the language of composers such as Schubert, Chopin, Brahms and even Debussy, to name but a few. This is all the more astounding as the "Archduke" does not officially belong to Beethoven's much mystified late period.

The trio's immense scope and depth of expression have always captured the imagination. It is a monumental work, nearing symphonic dimensions with more than 1200 measures of music, larger than any other trio up to this point. The sweeping melody that opens the *Allegro* is of a generous and noble character. In the development, that *cantabile* melody gets dissected and fragmented, until it is finally reduced to the smallest melodic element known in Western, music, a repeated half-step. In this process of deconstruction, Beethoven explores some highly novel and unusual instrumental colors in an extended pizzicato (plucking) section.

The following five-part *Scherzo* is possibly the vastest in Beethoven's entire chamber music output. Like the opening *Allegro*, it features the repeated use of the embryonic half step, at the beginning of the trio section, as well as in the coda. But here the semitone takes on an ominous character. We feel momentarily lost, in the tonal ambiguity of melodic oscillations, until Beethoven gives us a triumphant arrival in a new - and unexpected key, D flat Major! Nor do we stay there for long, before we move further afield to the truly remote key of E Major. How he gets us back to Bflat Major, through a succession of highly subtle harmonic manipulations, will forever remain one of the great mysteries in music.

The slow movement, *Andante cantabile*, in D Major (the choice of key here again adventurous for his time) is arguably one of Beethoven's finest variations, ever. Its spirituality cannot be captured in words, yet it speaks the eloquent language of a hard-won inner peace. As it encapsulates the moment of transition from one world into another, it summarizes the essence of human existence.

These almost mystical variations are immediately followed by the final *Allegro* which very quickly - and a little cruelly - brings us back to earth with its B-Flat Major reality. While the first and third movements were breathing an air of serenity and nobility of spirit, the last *Allegro moderato* could not be more dissimilar in character, marked as it is by rustic and almost mocking earthliness.

The “Archduke” was the last work the composer ever performed in public, at the age of 44. He was noticeably hampered in the collaboration with his two partners, Ignaz Schuppanzigh and Joseph Linke, by his now far-progressed deafness. On April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1814, the young pianist and composer Ignaz Moscheles writes in his diary:

*Heard a new trio in B flat Major by Beethoven during a musical entertainment at the “Roman Emperor” [hotel] at noon, performed by himself. So many compositions claim ‘new-ness’ nowadays, and it is mostly undeserved. But never Beethoven’s, and especially not this trio, which is filled with so many original ideas! His playing, apart from the spirit which imbued it, was less satisfying to me, because it lacked clarity and precision; but I did detect many signs of great artistry also in his playing, which of course I had long since found in his compositions.*

Yes, Beethoven was no more at the height of his powers as a pianist, but it is exactly that enormous, at times shocking, tension between other-worldliness and real life that Moscheles witnessed in this memorable live performance, which imbues Beethoven’s compositions with a timeless quality and lasting relevance.

- *Notes by Rebecca Hang*

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