

Chamber Music Unbound presents:

FELICI PIANO TRIO

March 12 & 13, 2022

Cerro Coso College, Mammoth Lakes & Bishop

Program

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Divertimento in B-Flat Major, K. 254

Allegro assai

Adagio

Rondo. Tempo di menuetto

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Adagio, Variations and Rondo for Piano Trio in G Major, opus 121a
“Kakadu Variations” (“Cockatoo Variations”)

-INTERMISSION -

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Piano Trio in B-Flat Major, opus 21

Allegro molto

Adagio molto e mesto

Allegretto scherzando

Finale. Allegro vivace

W. A. Mozart was barely twenty when he composed the piano trio heard tonight, which was his first work in this emerging new genre. At the time, he was still living in Salzburg, and contrary to his own perception, he was his hometown's much appreciated, even celebrated, “favorite son”. He was all around encouraged and given limitless opportunities to exhibit his virtuosity, both as a performer and composer, drawing a decent salary from the court of the Archbishop.

But neither father nor son Mozart were happy or content with their situation. After having seen “the world” on their many trips across Europe, Salzburg appeared provincial - its people less educated and refined than those of London, Paris, Vienna or Milan. Also, the old archbishop had recently retired, and the new one was a lot less flexible with regards to the requested absences of two of his most reputable musicians at court. And so it came about that on September 23, 1777, W. A. Mozart departed for Paris, by way of Munich, Augsburg, Mannheim, for the first time not in the company of his domineering father, but his resigned mother. The eventful 16-month journey is well-documented in the correspondence between father and son: the latter is continuously high-spirited, full of stories and plans, and the father's letters become increasingly more irritable and anxious in face of the supposed irresponsibility his son is displaying in his professional and personal life.

This following excerpt reveals the “iron fist” with which Leopold tried to hold on to being the sole guide in his

son's development as a musician - well into Mozart's adulthood and artistic maturity.

It is better that whatever does you no honor, should not be given to the public. That is the reason why I have not given any of your symphonies to be copied, because I suspect that when you are older and have more insight, you will be glad that no one has got hold of them, though at the time you composed them you were quite pleased with them. One gradually becomes more and more fastidious.

No wonder the now 22 year-old Wolfgang was rebelling on his first "solo-outing" to Paris. He was neither a child nor a teenager anymore. He received a salary from the Salzburg court and he had completed at this point a number of works that would become immortal, like his early opera "La Finta Giardinera", the famous "Haffner Serenade", some early piano concertos and the five violin concertos. One of the works that Wolfgang carried in his luggage to Paris, and which he surely performed several times en route, was his first piano trio in B-flat Major, which was completed in 1776.

It is nice to know that Mozart chose this trio to accompany him on this momentous journey. He must have felt that it was both representative of his best work to date as well as a novelty in more general terms, since the piano trio genre was only at the beginning of its development. Wolfgang was proud of this piece, and I imagine that he played it a lot with the new musical friends and acquaintances he made along the way to Paris.

The "Divertimento" successfully combines elements of the early piano and violin concerto style into a lovely piece of chamber music. And it is clear that the young composer forgets that chamber music should be written with an eye to its marketability to amateur musicians looking for home entertainment... Instead of writing parts that can be easily played and combined, Mozart composes music that can be easily listened to because it is so sparkling and entertaining (therefore the unusual title "Divertimento"?). Maybe this explains why Mozart published only six piano trios, whereas his revered elder colleague, Joseph Haydn, produced 45 of the same.

In any case, this delightful piece shows the young composer as a fearless innovator. In spite of his youth, Mozart has already absorbed a multitude of stylistic tools to shape his very own and unmistakable musical language, which gives voice to his irrepressible and contagious *joie de vivre*.

- Notes by Rebecca Hang

The time between Beethoven's first conception of this set of variations and its eventual publication 20 years later was a turbulent one: the composer witnessed the onset of the Napoleonic Wars in 1803 and the French occupation of Vienna in 1805; he reacted artistically to the rise and fall of Napoleon (with his "Eroica Symphony") and was to experience firsthand the Congress of Vienna, in which the political order of Europe was "re-shuffled".

For Beethoven's artistic development, the post-Congress years between 1815-19 were a time of personal crisis, as he lost a large segment of his audience, who turned to lighter forms of musical entertainment. Rather than engaging with Beethoven's newest works, Viennese music lovers followed the hedonistic trends in society at large that marked the Biedermeier period; they sought out easy entertainment to forget about the frustration of individual freedom and suppressed violence in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. They embraced Italian composers such as Rossini, or lesser-known Austrian composers who would furnish them with a continuous supply of 'fresh' dance music.

And while Beethoven's compositions became increasingly serious through his middle period, the *Kakadu Variations* ("Cockatoo Variations") reveal the iconic composer as a man who is capable of looking at the world with a good sense of humor. These brilliant variations furthermore demonstrate how genius can transform a pop tune into a profound work of art.

The slow and somber introduction that opens the *Kakadu Variations* strikes us as “mock-serious” as soon as we hear the lighthearted, folksy theme: a popular tune from Wenzel Müller’s light opera *The Sisters of Prague*. Müller, although virtually unknown today, was at the time a prominent Austrian Kapellmeister and composer, the director of the *Leopoldtstädter Theater* in Vienna between 1786 and 1830. The most prolific and most popular of all the theater composers of his time, Müller produced a startling number of ‘street hits.’

The exact date of composition for Beethoven’s variations remains a mystery, but it is now assumed that Beethoven wrote the *Kakadu Variations* originally around 1803 and revised them in 1816, during his period of creative drought. He only offered them to the publisher Gottfried Härtel in 1823 with the following note attached: “I send you some Variations with an introduction and coda for piano, violin and cello on a well-known tune by Wenzel Müller. And although they are from my earlier works, they are not bad.”

The particular aria Beethoven chose to base his variations on, “Ich bin der Schneider Wetz und Wetz” (“I am the busiest tailor in town”), bears strong resemblance to Mozart’s *Papageno* aria (from the “Magic Flute”), and the two sets of lyrics share a humorous gist. In the ears of the listeners of the day, Müller’s song would have actually evoked some PG 13 overtones. Nobody seems to know where the nickname *Kakadu* originated, but maybe the PG 13 lyrics necessitated an intercession by an early publisher? (The cockatoo is, after all, a monogamous bird – very unlike the protagonist of the above mentioned aria...)

Through Beethoven’s variations, Müller’s straightforward melody underwent a final metamorphosis which gained it immortality. After the serious introduction, Beethoven certainly captures the light-hearted spirit of the original tune. Yet it is evident from the first theme statement in the piano, that Beethoven’s goal is to ennoble this charming, but simple musical idea. As for the variations themselves, they run the full gamut of expression, allowing each instrument its time in the limelight until finally they culminate in a sparkling coda where all three instruments join in a charming, and at times raucous, *gigue*.

- Notes by Rebecca Hang

Work and play, seemingly polar opposites in our human experience, unify the creative process of great musicians. **Antonin Dvořák**, the son of a Czech butcher and innkeeper, discovered his love for music as a young child, learning to play the violin. His father, who loved the zither, nurtured his son’s musical talent - until the boy expressed the desire to make music his profession. Unable to imagine how the oldest of his nine children could ever earn a living from making music, father Dvořák sent the thirteen-year-old off to the nearby town of Zlonice to learn the trade of butchery and improve his German, an important second language for all Czech subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

So, over the course of the next two years young Antonin completed his apprenticeship as butcher while living with his uncle’s family. But the boy also had the good fortune to find a determined supporter in all matters musical in his German teacher: Anton Liehmann was a well-rounded musician and a strict instructor, something young Dvořák didn’t mind at all. Liehmann competently taught the teenager piano, organ, viola and music theory. He introduced Dvořák to the great music of the German tradition, in particular the music of Beethoven. When father Dvořák became suspicious, he sent his son a little further away, to the German speaking town of Kamnitz, where he lived with the family of a local miller, whose son in turn moved in with the Dvořáks. Antonin was happy in Kamnitz and quickly discovered in the church’s choir director a “second Liehmann,” who continued to further his studies of music, on the organ and in theory.

Upon his return home, father Dvořák insisted that the sixteen-year old practice his trade as butcher. Eventually though, he was swayed to let his talented son move to Prague, where he would study to become an organist, the most solid and practical of musical callings. For two years Dvořák attended the organ school in Prague, and earned his degree as a church musician, living all the while in abysmal poverty. After graduation (as the second best student) he looked for work in one of the many churches of Prague, but couldn’t find any.

During the next decade, Dvořák would cover many pages of music manuscript paper with his creative ideas, while trying to make a living playing the viola in a small private orchestra that would entertain the patrons of various inns with waltzes, polkas and the like. When this orchestra was engaged as the theatre orchestra in 1862, Dvořák became its principal violist (one of two) and earned salary so meager, it wouldn't even cover his very modest living expenses. In order to get by, he taught individual music lessons and substituted as organist.

Outside poverty and inner growth of musical riches marked this period of twelve years which ended in 1871, when Dvořák quit his theater job because he needed more time for composition. That year saw the first public performance of one of Dvořák's works, which soon led to his first big success with the cantata "Hymn: The Heirs of the White Mountain", in a performance by the 300-member-strong *Hlahol Choir* in 1873. This setting of a patriotic poem by the Czech poet Vítězslav Hálek yielded a composition of strong emotional resonance, in which Beethovenian humanism is put in the service of Czech nationalism - with all the optimistic belief that the young composer had in humanity in general, and in his Czech people in particular!

Even though his opera "King and Charcoal Burner" was rejected shortly thereafter by the theater administration on grounds of "un-playability", the now thirty-year-old was not discouraged. In November he married his former piano student Ana Čermáková, and undeterred, set out to re-compose the entire opera...

There are only a few instances in the history of music, where rejection leads to such a complete and productive turn-around in a composer's creative approach as in Dvořák's case: he shed his (self-proclaimed) "crazy period," which was largely influenced by the music of Wagner and Liszt, and rewrote his opera in a style that must be deemed as more representative of his "true self". In November of 1874 an entirely new and improved "King and Charcoal Burner" was given at the National Theater and Dvořák's career took a decisive turn: his first work appeared in print, and in the course of just a few weeks, Dvořák composed his first *Piano Quartet*, *opus 23*, the immortal *Serenade for Strings*, and our *Piano Trio opus 21*.

The trio's eloquent language is unmistakably Dvořák: it is a well-balanced mix of German forms and Czech melodicism, which unfolds its magical charm promptly with the first theme. It serves, retrospectively, as a reminder that the pentatonic melodies associated with the composer's "American" works represented "Czechness" for their creator as well... Poignantly rhythmical figures appear throughout the first movement, giving it an air of lyrical playfulness as well as allowing for vigorous energy to gain momentum. The development section shows Dvořák's harmonic skills, undoubtedly shaped by his studies of Schubert's compositions, in establishing fresh contexts for his principal musical material.

The second movement, *Adagio molto e mesto* (very slow and sad) is one of the most touching slow movements in Dvořák's entire chamber music output. Its G Minor tonality brings to mind of course Smetana's only piano trio in the same key, composed to commemorate his young daughter's passing. Like the Smetana family, the Dvořáks suffered deeply from the loss of their three first-born children. But the *Adagio's* sadness never drifts into sentimentality or pathos. Rather, its ardent lament expresses sorrow with a familiarity that we understand intuitively. The piano trio, with its intimate yet varied instrumentation, seems best fit to translate into sound this archetypal grief, the piano stating a sad fact which is lamented then in the cello and finally transcended in the violin. By the time Dvořák reaches the far away key of A Major, our sadness has given way to hopeful longing, which is sustained almost until the very end, at which the inescapable reality of G Minor reminds us of our emotional point of departure.

The ensuing *Allegretto scherzando* gently dispels the shadows of the *Adagio*. It oscillates (maybe a little naively, but certainly creatively) between adherence to the form of a Beethovenian *Scherzo*, and a melodic content that seems to want to dissolve this very form. Dvořák, for the first time here, evokes the characteristics of the Pan-slavistic *dumka* (an instrumental piece with a ruminative, melancholy character, interspersed with sections that are cheerful and ebullient) which will play a prominent role in Dvořák's later output, culminating with the composition of the *Dumky Trio* in 1892, just before his departure to America.

Only the *Finale* movement reveals that our trio is, after all, an “early” masterpiece, as Dvořák tries to integrate cyclical features (references to earlier movements) into the dramaturgy of a convincing conclusion. The excessive wealth of the composer’s melodic invention becomes almost an obstacle in creating stringent formal cohesiveness, but it sure makes for entertaining listening...

Was it play, was it work for Dvořák to create music of lasting value? Surely it was both, and for us lucky listeners of the 21st century, Dvořák’s music continues to serve as a reminder of the possibilities of reconciliation: humanism with nationalism, material poverty with intellectual riches, folklore with artistic refinement. Dvořák’s work reminds us that they are not mutually exclusive, and that out of their integration great art is sometimes born.

- *Notes by Rebecca Hang*

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