

Dallas Chamber Music Society presents
Setzer-Finckel-Han Trio
Monday 3 November 2014
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2014

This evening's program juxtaposes piano trios by two great German romantic composers. In theory, the Mendelssohn is a late work and the Brahms an early one. Mendelssohn completed his C minor trio in 1845; Brahms composed the B major work less than a decade later, in 1853 and 1854.

The full story is somewhat more complicated. Late in Brahms's career – and nearly forty years after Mendelssohn had died at age 38 – Brahms revisited a handful of early scores, including his First Piano Trio. His extensive revisions to the B major work make it a striking hybrid of his early and mature styles.

Both Mendelssohn's and Brahms's trios are superb examples of a chamber music genre that enjoyed enormous popularity throughout the 19th century. Both men were excellent pianists, and their writing reflects their respective keyboard styles. Equally important is that these trios reveal a shared reverence for classical form and design, cloaked in the harmonic vocabulary of the romantic era.

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. 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. Biographer 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.

Piano Trio No.1 in B major, Op. 8 Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Johannes Brahms met Robert and Clara Schumann at the end of September, 1853. The rapport between the older couple and the young genius from Hamburg was immediate. Their historic meeting proved momentous for all three, and resulted in some of the most compelling and celebrated music, performances, published criticism and romantic lore of the entire 19th century.

Barely 20, Brahms had thus far only published songs and large works for solo piano. Perhaps inspired by the stimulating association with the Schumanns, Brahms now turned to chamber music – one of Robert's strengths – toward the end of that year. By January 1854, he had completed an expansive, four-movement piano trio in B major. We know that he had already destroyed a large number of chamber works and other compositions. The new trio was the first piece of chamber music that satisfied him enough to publish; it was released later that year as Op.8.

One month after Brahms completed the trio, on 27 February 1854, Robert Schumann threw himself into the Rhine in a tragic suicide attempt that resulted in his commitment to a mental asylum in Endenich. He never recovered his health, and remained at Endenich until his death in 1856. Clara was understandably stricken. She had lost the daily emotional support of the husband she adored, and she was left with seven small children to support and an eighth on the way. Brahms was her near constant companion and psychological anchor during this trying time. The B major trio was one of the works he played to Clara to comfort her after Robert's accident.

More than a quarter century elapsed before Brahms composed another piano trio. His next one was Op. 87 (1880-82). The premiere took place in Frankfurt on 29 December 1882, on the same program that introduced his String Quintet in F, Op.88. By then, Brahms had become

the grand old man of Austro-German music: the most prominent living composer. (Wagner, in some camps Brahms's arch-rival, had suffered a massive heart attack in March 1882. He died less than two months after the Brahms premiere in Frankfurt.)

In 1888, Brahms's publisher Fritz Simrock negotiated with Breitkopf & Härtel to secure the rights to the first ten works Brahms had published as a twenty-something. Simrock was intent on becoming Brahms's sole publisher. Apart from some late vocal quartets, he would issue the first editions of everything Brahms subsequently composed.

In the short term, Simrock inquired whether Brahms would like to revise any of the works published as Op.1 through Op.10. Looking over the B major trio thirty-five years later, Brahms decided that he would. During the summer of 1889 Brahms wrote to Clara from Ischl:

With what childish amusement I whiled away the beautiful summer days you will never guess. I have rewritten my B major trio and can call it Op.108 instead of Op.8. It will not be so wild as it was before--but whether it will be better--?

Simrock eventually published both versions of the trio as Op.8. Comparison of the two is a fascinating illustration of the differences in Brahms's spirit and musical philosophy during his youth and in his final years. The themes remain the same; their treatment differs. The later, revised version – which the Finckel-Han-Setzer Trio performs – is considerably shorter and more compact; its structure is altogether tighter, yet it preserves the passion and heady romanticism of the original material. A unity of motivic ideas among the four movements makes it a quasi-cyclic composition as well. We hear in the later version the ardour of youth tempered by the wisdom and skill of maturity.

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