

**The Prometheus
Piano Trio**

Wednesday, February 23rd 2005



Programme

Piano Trio no. 3 in E major K542

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
(1756-1791)

Allegro
Andante grazioso
Allegro

Mozart's five mature piano trios were all written within the two years 1786-1788: a period which saw the composer's last three symphonies, Don Giovanni, most of the late piano concertos and the two piano quartets. It also saw some of the more upsetting events of Mozart's life: the death of his beloved and most supportive father, and a running battle with his creditors. In June 1788 he was writing to a fellow mason, Michael Puchberg, for the loan of two thousand guilden, in order to meet "unavoidable expenses at the proper time and, *secondo*, work with a lighter heart and more care-free mind, and consequently earn more". The letter contains much more on the subject of Mozart's finances, but ends with a PS: "—When are we to have a little music at your house again?—I have written a new trio!—". And indeed this was the E major trio, and very sunny it is considering the circumstances of the time.



Mozart in 1789

In the earlier trios Mozart had not fully cast aside the baroque conventions by which the piano dominated the works, with the strings playing second (and third) fiddle, but here the violin and piano are evenly matched, and even the cello has moments when it breaks its *basso continuo* fetters. The first movement is nevertheless reminiscent of the concertos, with the piano taking the lead from the start, and setting the musical agenda throughout. The slow movement is a trim minuet, with the theme and its development mainly in the hands of the pianist once more, but with some deeply moving ensemble moments. The finale has all its buttons done up, and is very smart indeed.

Trio

Modéré
Pantomim: assez vif
Passacaille: Très large
Final: Animé

Ravel was born in Ciboure, a fishing village near St Jean-de-Luz in the Basse-Pyrénées, and it was to St-Jean-de Luz that he retired in the summer of 1913 to write the Trio, which he had been planning since 1908. By the following March he had written the first movement, but further progress was delayed by the self-imposed distraction of a piano concerto he wanted to write, based on themes derived from Basque folk-lore. But accommodating folk themes in his personal style proved too difficult, and by the summer he was labouring again at the *Trio*, without great enthusiasm: "for the last three weeks the Trio has made no progress and I am disgusted with it. Today however I have decided that it's not too nauseating. . . and the carburettor is now repaired." What seems to have stimulated completion was the outbreak of the first World War, and Ravel's eagerness to volunteer for military service. By the end of August he was informing Durand, his publisher, that the work was ready, and telling his friends that he was prepared to look on it as a posthumous work.

The *Trio* certainly doesn't betray the pains of its gestation. The first movement starts with a gently swaying theme for the piano, described by Ravel as "Basque in colour", and from the first bar the quintessence of the composer. This is taken up by the violin and developed in a sequence of alternately introspective and passionate sections before ending in the initial reflective mood. The second movement's title, *Pantomim*, refers to a poetic form, said to be of Malay origin and sometimes employed by Baudelaire, in which the second and fourth lines of one stanza become the first and third of the following one—a device which is, to say the least, difficult to detect in the music. What is easier to hear is some brilliant juxtaposition of rhythms in the middle section: strings in 3/4 against the piano's 4/2, and then vice versa.

The slow Passacaille consists of a theme repeated nine times, with transformations and elaborations, starting with each instrument in turn, and ending with them in reverse order. Its stateliness sets us up for the sparkling finale, in which Ravel pulls out all the stops and uses all the tone colours that this combination of instruments has to offer in an almost orchestral climax.

Interval



Ravel in 1907

Maurice Ravel
(1875-1937)

Trio in E flat for piano, violin and cello op.100 D929

Allegro
Andante con moto
Scherzando: Allegro moderato—Trio
Allegro moderato

Schubert wrote his second trio in 1827, the year before his death, after he had finished the second part of *Winterreise*. It was first performed on December 26th of that year, and again at a concert the following March, which his friends persuaded him to give and from which he derived some much-needed funds. The concert attracted little attention from a press which was agog at the imminent appearance of Paganini; Schubert spent a little of his revenue from his concert to see the violinist. He probably spent rather more in entertaining his friends, for he was soon trying to sell the trio to the publisher Schott in Berlin, telling him that it "was played in front of a tightly packed hall in my concert, with extraordinary applause". Schott refused it, on the grounds that it was "probably large", but Probst, a rival publisher, picked it up, although the delay in engraving it meant that Schubert almost certainly never saw a proof. In August he wrote to Probst requesting that the edition should be faultless, and expressing his eager anticipation to see it, but its publication was three weeks after his death.

Schott guessed correctly. The trio is indeed a large work. In the first movement the vigorous theme is developed exhaustively, and halfway through comes to something like a full stop before the second theme appears, pianissimo, and is worked up to the energy level which allows the first theme back in. The second movement has a steady, march-like piano accompaniment to the theme, which friends of Schubert's maintained had been inspired by a Swedish folk melody which he had heard a young tenor, Isak Berg, sing. This gives way to rippling figures under a dialogue between violin and cello. The movement ends with a delicious repeat of the theme, translated to the major, over first *pizzicato* and then *arco* strings. The third movement is not a full-blown scherzo—Schubert referred to it as a minuet—but skips along quietly in a mostly canonical way, to be punctuated by a heartier trio. The finale has three subjects: a cheerful main theme, a completely different subject distinguished by its rapid repeated notes in the piano part, and the surprise return of the melody of the slow movement, totally transformed in its new surroundings. It makes its last appearance about a minute before the end of the movement, and has the final word.



Schubert in 1825

Franz Schubert
1797-1828

