

Music@Menlo 2008

Carte Blanche Concert

Wu Han, Philip Setzer, and David Finckel:

The Schubert Piano Trios

SUNDAY, JULY 27, 10:30 A.M.

Stent Family Hall, Menlo School

Music@Menlo dedicates this performance to Iris and Paul Brest with gratitude for their generous support.

TODAY'S PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

SCHUBERT (1797–1828) Piano Trio in B-flat Major, D. 898 (1828)
Piano Trio in E-flat Major, D. 929 (ca. 1827–28)

Of Schubert's Piano Trio in B-flat, Robert Schumann wrote: "One glance at Schubert's Trio—and the troubles of our human existence disappear and all the world is fresh and bright again." The majestic scope of Schubert's glorious second trio bespeaks another of Schumann's assessments: that of Schubert's "heavenly lengths."

Deepening the festival's look at the Classical trajectory from Joseph Haydn to Franz Schubert, pianist Wu Han, violinist Philip Setzer, and cellist David Finckel present Schubert's magnificent pair of piano trios. Dating from the composer's final years, these masterpieces capture the pivotal moment in history between the Classical and the Romantic eras.

Some terms throughout these program notes appear in **BOLDFACE**. They can be found in the Glossary of Musical Terms in the program book.

PROGRAM

Franz SCHUBERT (1797–1828) | **Piano Trio in B-flat Major, op. 99, D. 898** (1828)

- I. Allegro moderato
- II. Andante un poco mosso
- III. Scherzo: Allegro
- IV. Rondo: Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

Franz SCHUBERT | **Piano Trio in E-flat Major, op. 100, D. 929** (ca. 1827–28)

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante con moto
- III. Scherzo: Allegro moderato
- IV. Rondo: Allegro moderato

Wu Han, piano; Philip Setzer, violin; David Finckel, cello

Franz Schubert (Born January 31, 1797, Vienna; died November 19, 1828, Vienna)

Piano Trio in B-flat Major, op. 99, D. 898

Piano Trio in E-flat Major, op. 100, D. 929

Composed: According to what evidence we have in lieu of Schubert's manuscript, the B-flat Trio was composed within weeks prior to the **OPUS** 100 Trio in E-flat Major, whose autograph is dated November 1827.

Published: Like many of Schubert's works, the B-flat Trio was not published until after the composer's death. It appeared in print only in 1836 as the composer's Opus 99. The Trio in E-flat Major—which Schubert seems to have more actively peddled—was published in 1828 by Probst, in Leipzig.

First performances: In January 1828, Schubert wrote in a letter to a friend about the recent performance of a "new trio," given on December 26 under the auspices of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (Society of Friends of Music). While said trio is widely assumed to have been the E-flat Trio, the presentation of this same work as a "new" (which typically meant "never before heard") trio on a concert program three months later (more on which in a moment) leaves open the possibility that the work premiered in December may in fact have been the B-flat.

Otherwise, the earlier trio in B-flat would have received only a private performance during Schubert's lifetime, on January 28, 1828, courtesy of three of Vienna's top chamber musicians: pianist Carl Maria von Bocklet, violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh (who, as the leader of nineteenth-century Vienna's finest string quartet, first gave voice to Beethoven's middle and late quartets), and cellist Josef Linke (Schuppanzigh's quartet colleague and the first interpreter of Beethoven's Opp. 69 and 102 cello **SONATAS**). The same three musicians had given the performance of December 26, whether this was of the first or second piano trio.

Schubert's particular pride in the E-flat is evidenced by his inclusion of it as the centerpiece on a program of his own music on March 26, 1828, commemorating the first anniversary of Beethoven's death. The shadow of Beethoven is significant, not only for Beethoven's profound influence on Schubert on the whole but also for his own granite essays in the piano-trio genre. Indeed, there may be no higher compliment than Robert Schumann's regard for Schubert's Opus 100 as equal to Beethoven's formidable "Ghost" and "Archduke" trios.

Other works from this period: Despite his great physical suffering and psychological anguish at the end of his life, Schubert did not go quietly. His final year was staggeringly productive. Between mid-1827 and November 1828, Schubert completed, in addition to the two piano trios, the fantasies in C major, for violin and piano, and in f minor, for four-hand piano; the "Great" Symphony; the Cello Quintet; more than two dozen songs, including the presciently titled *Schwanengesang* (Swan Song); and the last three piano sonatas, in addition to numerous other piano, vocal, and orchestral works—all told, an imposing set of masterpieces, miraculously concentrated within a deeply trying twelve months or so, unequaled by many composers over entire lifetimes. Schumann's reflection on the E-flat Trio poetically captures the meteoric luminosity of the end of Schubert's life: "Some years ago, a trio by Schubert passed across the ordinary musical life of the day like some angry manifestation in the heavens. It was his hundredth opus, and shortly afterward, in November 1828, he died."

—Patrick Castillo

Schubert Trios

By Michael Steinberg

Probably because the two piano trios from Schubert's sadly brief but wondrous maturity were assigned consecutive opus numbers, 99 and 100, by their respective publishers, we sometimes think of them as twins, or at least as siblings remarkably alike. But as we get to know them, we are likely to be struck even more by the ways in which they differ, unmistakably Schubertian though both are, and we will find ourselves grateful to have two masterpieces that speak to such different artistic and spiritual hungers within us.

They were begun about a month apart, the B-flat in October 1827, the E-flat in November. This closeness might remind us of those sharply contrasting pairs or groups that Mozart sometimes produced in close proximity—the last three symphonies, for example, the C major and g minor viola quintets, or the super-neat *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* and its delightfully bizarre neighbor, *A Musical Joke*. And apropos chronological proximity, we might also note that when Schubert began the ebullient B-flat Trio, he had just been working on the second part of his great **LIEDER** cycle *Winterreise* (*Winter Journey*), songs so dark that most of his friends found them too frightening to live with and rejected them. It is all a reminder to be careful about rushing to make immediate associations between life and work. A composer does not write *Winterreise* when he is in a glum mood and the first **MOVEMENT** of the B-flat Trio when he is feeling better a few days later: both draw on the whole experience and expressive resources gathered during the course of life up to that point.

Robert Schumann responded acutely to the difference between the two trios. About the one in B-flat, he writes: “One glance, and the world

shines afresh again.” He goes on to recollect how ten years earlier, the E-flat Trio had passed “across the ordinary musical life of the day like some angry manifestation in the heavens...Intrinsically [the two works] bear little resemblance to each other. The first movement, which in the [E-flat Trio] is inspired by profound rage as well as by boundless longing, is graceful and virginal in the [B-flat]. The **ADAGIO**, there a sigh capable of rising to deep anxiety within the heart, is here a happy dream, a swelling and receding of happy human feelings...In a word, the Trio in E-flat is more active, masculine, and dramatic.”

The B-flat Trio used decidedly to be the more popular of the two works, but in recent years the E-flat has come to be recognized as the supreme masterwork it is. For Schumann it was one of the select few *Meistertrios*, together with Beethoven's “Archduke” and “Ghost.” If we can still sense something innocent about the B-flat, the E-flat reminds us that *Winterreise* was a watershed in Schubert's life: though just thirty, he was never a young man again. It was also in 1827, in March, that Beethoven died. Schubert mourned him deeply, but from that moment, as the composer John Harbison has put it, he assumed with new and unflinching confidence Beethoven's “dimensions and ambitions as if they [were] his natural legacy.” And so, after the B-flat Trio, uncomplicated, gracious, warm, “natural,” pleasing, all that we simply—perhaps too simply—think of as “Schubertian,” we have the troubled and troubling work of a more farseeing, far-reaching composer whose understanding of music and whose pain went far beyond the experience of his pre-*Winterreise* self. To quote Harbison again: “Schubert's tragic vision is not veiled here, it is fully revealed, and the internal proportions through

which he conveys the vision are exacerbated and subversive...as a reach into the unsayable and unknowable is beyond comparison.”

Actually, if we listen carefully to the B-flat Trio, we will hear that it is not as innocent as all that. The very first **PHRASE**, buoyant and march-like, is an odd five measures long: four measures of **THEME** plus some virtuoso flourishes for the violinist and the cellist. And the response to that consists of an even more surprising phrase of seven measures. That this doesn't sound artificial or willful is part of Schubert's genius: he has inherited Mozart's gift for making the asymmetrical as natural as breathing. Equally delightful is Schubert's ear for texture, deliciously airy in this work, one that string players can approach without fear that the pianist will drown them out. For contrast to this vigorous opening, Schubert gives us a new theme in his most touchingly lyric vein. And he does not cease to be inventive in the ways he reviews his material in the **RECAPITULATION** and highly energized **CODA**.

The second movement, in a lilting 6/8 **METER**, is one of the sweetest of Schubert's songs. Its **HARMONIC** progress adds both color and depth of feeling. The middle of the movement brings some darker weather, though this is more of a squall from his earlier *Die schöne Müllerin* songs rather than a ferocious *Winterreise* tempest. The **SCHERZO** is lighthearted, its contrasting **TRIO**, broadly lyrical. Schubert heads the finale with the designation “**RONDO**,” but in fact he gives us a fully developed sonata-form movement. It is music full of invention, none more remarkable than the rhythmic expansion into broad measures in 3/2 time, a surprise Schubert invites us to enjoy three times. The close is of irresistible brilliance.

The E-flat Trio played an important role in Schubert's life. It was first performed to great acclaim at a concert of the Society of Friends of

Music in Vienna on December 26, 1827, and it was repeated as the big work at an all-Schubert concert on March 26, 1828, the first anniversary of Beethoven's death, not a date chosen by happenstance. That evening was a landmark event in the young composer's career, and it could have changed everything for him but for the tragedy of his death not quite eleven months later. The fleet-fingered pianist who played in both those performances, and whom Schubert certainly had in mind for that assignment, was Carl Maria von Bocklet, a renowned virtuoso; his partners were two of the finest string players in Vienna, Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the most eminent quartet leader of the day, and Josef Linke, the cellist in the Schuppanzigh Quartet, both of them renowned for their association with Beethoven. We will not fail to notice the element of virtuosity, particularly piano virtuosity, in this work, writing that is advanced beyond anything to be found in the B-flat Trio.

The E-flat Trio's opening **ALLEGRO** is conceived and composed on a grand scale. This music is full of jolts, abruptions, and asymmetries, many of them realized during Schubert's process of careful inspection and revision. It also displays a tremendous and bold range of harmonic design. There is a critical tradition of long standing that maintains that Schubert had the first movement of the recently deceased Beethoven's “Eroica” Symphony in mind as a model, and one intense passage at the climax of the **DEVELOPMENT** does indeed make an unmistakable allusion to that work. Schubert's complicated relationship to Beethoven is one of the most fascinating sides of his artistic personality. On one side, we have his immense admiration for Beethoven, his readiness, particularly after the great man's death, to assume “The Mantle,” and undoubtedly his great late works could and would not be what they are without the stimulus of that awesome cynosure. (Schubert was shy as a man but not as

an artist.) On the other hand, we have a composer whose temperament is as different from Beethoven's as can be—feminine versus masculine is a drastic shorthand way of putting it—as well as one who, as Alfred Brendel, among others, has pointed out, took pains not to compose like Beethoven. These two currents collide to marvelous effect in this fiery movement. Schubert marks it *Allegro*, but the *Allegro CON BRIO* of the “Eroica” would not be out of place here.

The haunting march theme of the second movement, part Gypsy, part proto-Mahler, also revels in unexpected tensions, as well as giving us moments of aching melancholy and tenderness. According to an early tradition, the main theme is based on a Swedish song, but that supposed original has never been actually traced. Here, too, we have a storm as the center of the movement, and this one is truly terrific. The close is one of the most heartbreaking pages in all of chamber music.

The scherzo is of course lighter in mood, and its **CANONS**—first with strings imitating the piano, then the other way around—delight especially. The finale caused Schubert some trouble. It was thought too long at the first performance in Vienna in December 1827, and Schubert indicated considerable cuts, leaving no doubt that he wished those to be regarded as mandatory. A subsidiary theme with rapid repeated notes, while perhaps burdening the pianist with some moments of anxiety about the readiness of his instrument to respond, always gives special pleasure to listeners. But what stops the heart in this shorter finale is the return, twice, of the deeply shadowed march from the second movement. “Is there any music,” Schubert is said to have asked, “that is not sad?”