

Ludwig van Beethoven

7 Variations on “Bei Maennern, welche Liebe fuehlen”
from Mozart’s “The Magic Flute” for Piano and Cello in Eb Major, WoO 46

Beethoven composed his variations in the year 1801, after his first foray into virtuoso composition for the cello with his two sonatas op. 5 for the King of Prussia. Until the opus 5, there had been only sonatas with a continuo accompaniment instead of a written-out piano part, and Beethoven’s two sonatas can be justly regarded as the first of their kind. Beethoven performed the works at the Berlin court with the great cellist Jean-Pierre Dupont, who had emancipated the cello to the role of a melodic instrument. Thanks to his sophisticated bowing technique and advanced fingering (he was the one to introduce thumb position in Berlin), Dupont advanced the cello from “little bass” to a truly fashionable instrument and an equal partner in ensemble playing.

“Men in love” is a delightful, tender duet from Mozart’s opera “The Magic Flute”, in which the bird man Papageno and his wife-to-be, Papagena, extol the pleasures of love:

*“Men who feel love, have a good heart, too.
To share in the sweet sensations is women’s first priority.
Gladly we rejoice in love, we live but through love alone.
Love sweetens all trouble, every creature sacrifices to her.
Love sweetens our daily lives and works through the cycles of nature.
Love’s high purpose shows clearly, that nothing’s more noble than Man and Wife.
Man and Wife and Wife and Man, together attain divinity.”*

Beethoven was probably attracted to Mozart’s theme not just for musical reasons, but also because the idea of nobility and divinity attained through love resounded with his own high ideals of human existence.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Trio in B Major, Opus 8

Allegro con brio

Scherzo: Allegro molto. Meno allegro

Adagio

Allegro

The original version of **Johannes Brahms' Piano Trio opus 8 in B Major** was first performed publicly not in the young composer's native Germany, but in New York City, by pianist William Mason (who had brought the music with him from Europe), violinist Theodore Thomas and cellist Carl Bergmann!

The work was published in 1854, and although Brahms never actually stopped composing, he did not ready anything for publication for six entire years after that, because the congenial environment of the musical household of the Schumann family, where he had found a deeply inspiring home-away-from-home, had collapsed with the onset of the mental illness of composer Robert Schumann. The whole-hearted encouragement and considerable support young Brahms had received from both Robert and his wife Clara had guided him through the first stages of his finding his voice as a composer, and the tragedy that befell them affected him deeply. He rushed to assist Clara, herself a celebrated pianist, who had six children to take care of and was pregnant with the seventh, in any way he could, and in the course developed a strong romantic attachment to her. As Clara Schumann writes in her journal, following her husband's death in 1856:

He [Brahms] came as a true friend, to share with me all my sorrow; he strengthened my heart as it was about to break, he lifted my thoughts, lightened, when it was possible, my spirits. In short, he was my friend in the fullest sense of the word. I can truly say, my children, that I have never loved a friend as I loved him; it is the most beautiful mutual understanding of two souls. I do not love him for his youthfulness, not probably for any reason of flattered vanity. It is rather his elasticity of spirit, his fine gifted nature, his noble heart that I love... [Joseph] Joachim, too, as you know, was a true friend to me, but... it was really Johannes who bore me up... Believe all that I, your mother, have told you, and do not heed those small and envious souls who make light of my love and friendship, trying to bring up for question our beautiful relationship, which they neither fully understand nor ever could.

Brahms, maybe the most self-critical of all composers, soon expressed regrets over having the trio published prematurely in a letter to his friend, the great violinist Joseph Joachim, mentioned above. "...I would have liked to hold on to the trio for a little longer, because I would have surely made some changes..." And Clara noted that she wished the "trio had a different first movement."

Well, seventeen years later, in 1871, Brahms revised the first movement for a performance in Vienna. But only after *another* seventeen years, in 1888, did he embark on a serious revision for his publisher Simrock. The result is the *Trio opus 8* performed on tonight's concert! This new version is actually far more than a revision: it constitutes a re-composition - a creative effort that reaches far beyond the small improvements that must have initially been intended.

Fortunately, Brahms acknowledged the right of existence of the original trio, and we can rejoice in his special gift of the "new" opus 8. The two coexisting versions allow us to observe the young talent and the older master side-by-side in a rare glimpse which Brahms grants us into his creative process. The "improved trio," as Brahms liked to call it, is a work of great lyrical expression, yet the presentation of the musical material is so concentrated and concise that the music impresses with its dramatic density.

In the first movement *Allegro*, the new version successfully preserves the youthful enthusiasm of the opening theme, while condensing the working-out of the original material in the course of the movement. Lyrical lines and rhythmical drive are beautifully integrated, creating a sense of organic growth in the opening, and again in

the unfolding of the second theme. In the development section Brahms succeeds in further heightening the dramatic effect of the instrumental discourse and the intensity of the harmonies, building up to an emotional climax. The *Scherzo*, as a whole, is the movement that overall remains closest to the original. It begins rather mysteriously, and then turns boisterous, reflecting the young man's spirited good times with his Düsseldorf friends (Robert and Clara Schumann, Joseph Joachim and Julius Otto Grimm) on the river Rhine, which is famous not only for its beautiful wooded landscapes but also for its delectable wines...

The *Adagio*'s solemnity leaves us contemplating the melancholy inherent to beauty: a procession of widely spaced chords contains a presentiment of the elusiveness of life. The middle section's animated cello melody, however, beautifully reconciles the bleakness of the opening with the certainty of immortality with such skillfulness as only full maturity can bring about in a great artist. The last movement's unexpected turn to the key of B Minor inflects the melodic material with a sense of urgency and turbulence to create a fantastic atmosphere of "Sturm und Drang" ("Storm and Stress," the Pre-Romantic movement in German music and literature that emphasized the expression of individual subjectivity and emotional extremes). The outburst of the full-bodied second theme with its rustic syncopations brings us back to earth, the here and now.

In the end, it is left only to an artist as honest and unsentimental as Brahms to refine a youthful work in the manner with which he gave his opus 8 "a trim," as he describes his revisions in a letter to his friend Grimm:

*Do you still remember something of a Trio in B Major from the time of our youth and wouldn't you be eager to hear it now that – I didn't put a wig on it – but combed and tidied its hair a bit?
If you can make yourself free, I hope you'll come for a few days [to Cologne]...
I look forward to it enormously, pleased as Punch.*

Justified pride shines through his humble words, and the fond memories of youth are reflected also in a long letter to Clara Schumann who had just performed his third violin sonata and was inquiring about his progress with the trio. In his letter, just like in his music, Johannes Brahms is capable of reconciling his fondness of the past with unconcealed excitement about the future, a trait that earned him a reputation of being 'conservative' and 'progressive' at the same time:

Dear Clara,

That my D minor Sonata is strolling tenderly and dreamily beneath your fingers is a most agreeable and friendly thought to me. I have actually placed it on the music stand and accompanied you very thoughtfully and tenderly through the pedal-point shrubbery. Always with you by my side, and I simply know of no greater pleasure than to sit at your side or, as in this case, to stroll with you. []

We live here now under the sign of the phonograph, and I had the opportunity to hear it often and in comfort. You will have read plenty about the new miracle or will have had it described for you; once again it's as though one were living a fairy-tale! []

But in the mean time, fare you very well, bis bald [till very soon], as they say on the Rhine; give greetings to the Fräuleins and one or two others besides.

With all love,

Your Johannes

Brahms' *Trio opus 8* is a truly unique work in that its gestation spanned more than 35 years. The composer preserved in its final version the seeming opposites of youthful passion and mature reflection and weds them in the most intimate manner. If loyal friendship was maybe the greatest expression of the feeling of love for Brahms, he created a sounding monument to friendship in this trio!

- *Notes by Rebecca Hang*