

Classical Salamanca

Tuesday 11th November 2025

The Long Gallery, Salamanca Arts Centre.

Doors open at 6:30pm

Music commences at 7pm

String Trios:

Beethoven ~ String Trio Op 9 No 1 in G major

Webern ~ Movement for String Trio, Op Posthumous

Webern ~ String Trio Op 20

Mozart ~ Divertimento KV 563

Performer by Peter Tanfield (vln), Douglas Coghill (vla), and William Hewer (vc).

Program Notes

Beethoven String Trio

A string trio may be a string quartet minus one (violin), but that crucial subtraction need not be a negative factor if computed by Beethoven. Yet, in that writing for the combination of violin viola and cello can be more difficult than composing for a conventional string quartet, one wonders why Beethoven at about the age of 23 ventured a string trio before attempting the “easier” medium. The answer is not forthcoming, but the fact remains that the composer’s first string trio (Op. 3 in E-flat) preceded his first string quartet by several years, and what’s more, emerged a remarkably secure work. (To be sure, Beethoven had a splendid model in Mozart’s Divertimento in E-flat, K. 563, a trio masterpiece fully worthy of the young genius’ most serious scrutiny.)

In the few years following the Opus 3 Trio, Beethoven added many splendid compositions to his catalogue, among them the first two piano concertos, several piano sonatas, and various chamber works, including the three string trios of Opus 9. The latter compositions make an arrestingly varied set, the first energetic and buoyant, the second somewhat reticent in demeanour, the third dramatic and propulsive.

What they share is most important of all: a distinction that brings them up to the very highest level of accomplishment that Beethoven realized in what we consider his first period.

The first Trio of Opus 9 is a gem, a joy from first to last. Any suggestion that Beethoven before the age of 30 was no match for Mozart of the same vintage is defeated by the splendour of this work. It is at the same time taut and spacious, lyric and dazzling, spontaneous and brilliantly organized, instrumentally demanding and harmonically advanced. The slow introduction begins with a grand, curtain-parting gesture that has the three strings loudly proclaiming unison togetherness, after which an air of quiet theatrical expectancy prevails until the movement proper is reached, and reached with utmost subtlety. The main materials have flair and verve to spare, so that when the subordinate theme appears, hushed, in the unexpected key of D minor, one can just imagine Beethoven’s delight in the surprising change of mood and colour he has managed. The music is filled with event, not the least of which is the wayward phrase from the C-major Piano Concerto Beethoven was composing at about the same time as this Trio.

The wonderful slow movement, with its pastoral theme in the distant key of E major and its frequent, dramatically coloured shifts to minor, is like a preview of the world of Schubert, that Schubert who was born at about the time this work was being written. The breadth of expressiveness, defined both by richness of sonority and harmony, is remarkable, particularly in light of the movement’s simplicity of form.

A proper contrast to the Adagio's glow comes with the buoyancy of the Scherzo third movement, and then even more vitally with the strenuous vigours of the throw-caution-to-the-winds finale. At the very fast tempo Beethoven has indicated, an antic, *tour de force* spirit prevails throughout much of this last movement. Of course, there are marvellous stop signs along the way, and the headlong speed is arrested with utmost wit and elegance. After the last time the brakes are put on and the destination is sighted, there is no detaining the open-throttle race to the finish, ending as exhilarating a journey as young Ludwig ever engineered.

Webern String Trio works

Webern's String Trio, Op. 20, is a short, highly concise work that, despite its brevity, offers a rich exploration of musical form and expression. It's notable for its rigorous application of serial techniques and its exploration of traditional musical structures, particularly the sonata form. The piece is characterized by its stark, almost glacial, soundscape, with a focus on delicate timbres and contrasting dynamics.

Key Features and Structure:

- **Sonata Form:**

The first movement, while compressed, adheres to sonata form, with a main theme, a contrasting second theme, and a recapitulation.

- **Serialism:**

Webern uses a 12-tone row, which is a sequence of all 12 notes in the chromatic scale, to structure the music.

- **Contrast and Tension:**

The trio is marked by a strong contrast between the lyrical and the more dissonant or stark sections, creating a sense of tension and release.

- **Instrumentation:**

The piece is scored for three string instruments, allowing for a wide range of timbral possibilities, from the delicate to the powerful.

- **Timbre and Dynamics:**

Webern utilizes a wide range of string techniques, including harmonics, pizzicato, and various bowing styles, to achieve a diverse and expressive sound palette.

- **Emotional Landscape:**

The String Trio explores themes of loss, love, and spirituality, reflecting Webern's personal experiences and his search for meaning.

- **Brevity:**

The piece's concise structure, characteristic of Webern's style, allows for a focused and intense musical experience.

Webern's String Trio, Op. 20, is a masterpiece of minimalist musical expression. It's a work that rewards careful listening and invites the listener to engage with its intricate details and profound emotional depth.

Webern Movement for String Trio.

Mozart Divertimento

Simple means, employed to glorious effect, resulted in this extraordinary work from the pen of a 31-year-old genius who would be dead at the age of 35. He had composed his last three symphonies (No. 39

in the same key, E-flat; No. 40 in G minor; and No. 41 in C major, the “Jupiter”) in the three months prior, but his depressed circumstances would preclude any further composition for some nine months.

In his earlier years, Mozart had produced a wide assortment of works with such interchangeable titles as Cassation, Notturmo, Serenade, and Divertimento, some scored for wind ensemble, some for strings, some for orchestra, including charming but insignificant works as well as celebrated gems such as the Gran Partita for Winds, *Eine kleine Nachtmusik*, and the “Posthorn” Serenade.

In the more serious chamber music genres, Mozart had composed an extended collection of works for string quartet, and he wrote a masterful series of string quintets, but the Divertimento was his first and only music for string trio. Mingling the intimacy of forces with an abundance of invention, he produced his longest chamber work, and yet avoided any potential tedium by varying the tempos and the formal structures of the six movements.

The composer was in dire financial straits in 1788, and he wrote (not for the first time) to his fellow Freemason Michael Puchberg asking for a loan; by way of repayment, Mozart dedicated the Divertimento, K. 563, to Puchberg. Despite its modest instrumentation, the work received its premiere at a public concert, April 13, 1789, in Dresden. Mozart himself played his favourite instrument, the viola.

The sequence of movements was typical for such a “diverting” work, with an opening fast movement matched by a similar one to conclude, and a pair of slow movements plus two minuets sandwiched in between. In addition to the richness of his thematic materials, Mozart was clever enough to diversify his musical methods, writing one slow movement in sonata form, the other as a theme and variations. His minuets also exhibited differing structures, including an extra trio section for one of them. Analysis of such a masterpiece would be superfluous.