

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF FORT WORTH PRESENTS
“Franco-Belgian Connection”
BUSCH TRIO with Gary Levinson and D.J. Cheek
Saturday 1 February, 2025 - Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman ©2025

Piano Trio in B-flat major, WoO 39 [in one movement]
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

In early July 1812, Beethoven wrote a passionate letter to a woman identified not by name but addressed variously as ‘my angel, my all, my other self,’ ‘my dearest,’ ‘my faithful, one and only treasure,’ ‘my life, my everything,’ and ‘my immortal beloved.’ He added a lengthy postscript the following morning but never sent the letter. It was found in his personal effects after his death in March 1827. The intended recipient has become known in Beethoven lore as the Immortal Beloved.

Her identity perplexed Beethoven’s heirs and executors, who were baffled by this apparent evidence of a defining romantic relationship. (He never married.) Beethoven scholars debated the Immortal Beloved’s identity for decades, suggesting half a dozen women who figured prominently in his life. Then, in 1977, the late Maynard Solomon published a pathbreaking biography of Beethoven that argued persuasively that the woman in question was Antonie Brentano, née Birkenstock, wife of Franz Brentano and sister-in-law of Bettina Brentano. One of the pieces of evidence Solomon cited was the dedication of this piano trio to Antonie Brentano’s daughter just ten days prior to the now famous, unsent ‘Immortal Beloved’ letter.

Maximiliane Brentano was only ten and an aspiring pianist. Beethoven inscribed the manuscript to the Trio we identify by the catalogue number WoO 39 (WoO stands for Werke ohne Opuszahl, or ‘works without opus number’) with the following words: “For my little friend Maxe Brentano, to encourage her in pianoforte playing.” Evidently the child continued to practice with more than average success, for Beethoven later dedicated the Piano Sonata No. 30 in E, Op. 109 to her, as well. But it was the girl’s mother whom Beethoven likely wished to please with this delightful gift.

The trio itself is unprepossessing enough. A simple, charming single movement, it focuses on the modest keyboard part without sacrificing the basic principles of chamber music that call for balance and conversation among all participants. Uncomplicated though the music may be, it still is the writing of Beethoven at the height of his powers. This modest little movement, his last work for piano trio, followed on the heels of the “Archduke” Trio, Op. 97, his undisputed masterpiece for the combination. Its most noteworthy feature is an extended passage in D major at the beginning of the development. D major is quite distant from B-flat major, the home tonality, on the circle of fifths. D major and B-flat major are also the two keys Beethoven migrates between in the ethereal slow movement to the Ninth Symphony. Thus, this unassuming piano trio is a distant foretaste of the Olympian heights Beethoven would scale in that last symphonic masterpiece.

Piano Trio in E-flat major, Op. 1, No. 1
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Opus 1. What a world of promise is implied by those two words! They are even more pregnant when we think about a first work from Beethoven, one of the transcendent geniuses of western art. We must not, however, confuse "Opus 1" with "first composition." More accurately, it denotes "first published work," a composer's initial public presentation of his finest craft.

The use of opus numbers gained currency during the high Baroque, when composers' works customarily appeared in sets of twelve. Vivaldi, Corelli, and Albinoni each published a set of twelve trio sonatas as Opus 1. Half dozens became more common than full dozens in midcentury. Many of Haydn's string quartets, including his Opus 1, were published in sets of six.

By the 1780s, the custom of publishing six works together was giving way to sets of three. In part, this was because of increased length, but it also had to do with greater musical weight. Beethoven elected to publish three piano trios as his Op. 1 in 1795, dedicating them to his teacher, Joseph Haydn.

Beethoven had already composed a considerable amount of music. An entire subcatalogue of Beethoven's works called *Werke ohne Opuszahl* (abbreviated "WoO") consists of some two hundred additional compositions. Most were unpublished during Beethoven's lifetime, either because they were youthful works or because Beethoven chose to withhold them for some other reason.

The music of Beethoven's E-flat Trio is firmly stamped with the major characteristics of

his musical personality. Aggressive, vigorous, and positive, it features a prominent and virtuosic role for the pianist, which is to be expected; Beethoven was writing for himself. The keyboard part is not favored at the expense of the other players. One of Beethoven's major contributions in the realm of the piano trio was to write an independent cello part that did not exclusively duplicate the pianist's left hand. The cellist has its own significant melodic and contrapuntal role. Similarly, the violin assumes a greater proportion of the thematic material, making the trio a true collaboration rather than a piano sonata with accompaniment by strings.

Other features that mark the trio as Beethoven's are the unexpected changes of dynamics that demand our attention and refuse to relinquish it. Lively humor comes through, particularly in the last two movements. While this trio is not without its moments of drama, it is as cloudless a work as we are likely to audit of Beethoven. It is a touching reminder that in 1795, Beethoven had every reason to believe that the world was his to conquer and that life would present him with untrammelled opportunity.

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34
César Franck (1822-1890)

In the world of chamber music, a small group of piano quintets dominate the literature. About 10 percent of the literature receives 90 percent of the performances. The most famous of them, and the grandfather of them all, is Schumann's beloved Piano Quintet in E-flat, Op. 44. Close on its heels is the wonderful Brahms F minor Quintet, Op. 34, which we heard last May on this series. Rounding out the elite group are the quintets of Dvořák and Franck. The lone

twentieth-century representative that has approached the status of these romantic works is Shostakovich's Quintet in G minor, Op. 57. No one denies the musical worth of piano quintets by Bax or Borodin, Elgar or Fauré. They simply haven't achieved the stature of the others.

That stated, we hear the Franck Quintet less than any of the other "biggies." Everyone acknowledges it as a splendid work, and Franck scholars declare it to be his first entirely mature, unequivocal masterpiece. Perhaps because Franck was not prolific, he has garnered less attention as a chamber composer. Certainly the Quintet is altogether overshadowed by the Violin Sonata (1886), which is played almost as frequently on cello as it is on violin, thereby nearly doubling its performances. In the orchestra hall, we hear the d-minor symphony (1886-88), Franck's sole essay in the genre, and occasionally a performance of the splendid Variations symphoniques (1885) for piano and orchestra. Is Franck a one-work composer per genre? If so, this Quintet is definitely the one to choose in the realm of chamber music.

Franck completed his Quintet in 1879; the premiere took place on 17 January, 1880, with Camille Saint-Saëns at the piano. Franck had not tried his hand at chamber music in some thirty-six years, since writing two trios as a student. Clearly, he had accumulated a wealth of ideas, for his return effort was mammoth, weighing in at well over half an hour. The work's cyclic structure is one hallmark of Franck's later style, reflecting the formal influence of Franz Liszt. All three movements (there is no scherzo) are in sonata form, but his treatment does not have the disciplined and classic restraint of a Brahms. Franck treats form flexibly. We have a sense of connected episodes rather than tightly knit sonata structures. The result is a work as romantic

and full-blown as one could want; Franck's contemporaries were disturbed by its purported eroticism. The score's rich harmonies are indebted to Wagner, but Franck's unusual harmonic style is chromatic and modulatory to the point that his music is almost always instantly recognizable as his own. While the string writing is lush, Franck's piano part is an extraordinary virtuoso vehicle, surging with passionate arpeggios and magisterial chords, exploring the extremes of the keyboard in symphonic fashion.