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by Derek Katz

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Trio in D Major, Op. 9, No. 2 (1797-98, published 1798)

By the last decade of the 18th century, Beethoven was well-enough known as a composer that he had the luxury of composing only on commission, and, by 1801, claimed to have more commissions than he was capable of fulfilling. These commissions would mostly have been on the same terms. The amateur that solicited the work would receive sole use of the manuscript (promising to keep it private), while Beethoven retained the right to subsequent publication. Sheet music for string chamber music was a big business in Vienna at the end of the 18th century. The Vienna publisher Johann Traeg's 1799 catalogue offered over a thousand string quartets (by 118 different composers) for sale, as well as 515 string trios (albeit mostly for two violins and cello). In addition to whatever reward Beethoven received from the commissioner of the String Trios, and to whatever fee he collected for their dedication, he was also paid 50 ducats to publish them. This amount was roughly equivalent to a year and three months of rent for Beethoven.

Tempting as it is to read Beethoven's choices of genres in this period as a purposeful engagement with the legacies of Haydn and Mozart, the more prosaic explanation is that he wrote what he was paid to write. The existence of the three String Trios, Op. 9 indicates not that Beethoven was hesitant to take on the much higher prestige form of the string quartet, but merely reflects the desires of a particular patron. While the string trio may not have been as distinguished a genre as the string quartet at the time, Beethoven's Op. 9 Trios show the same perfection of craft and seriousness of intent as the Op. 18 String Quartets that he began immediately afterwards.

These trios would have intended both to be attractive and effective in private performances by professional players employed by aristocrats and also (if secondarily) to provide satisfaction for the amateur players who purchased the sheet music. Both purposes encouraged interplay and exchange between the parts, whether to give the impression of a sophisticated conversation to be overheard by noble listeners or to share the pleasure of playing amongst amateurs.

The D major Trio gives a misleading impression of gentleness, frequently subverting apparently innocuous ideas with more emotionally complex material. The Trio begins very quietly in a moderate tempo, alternating gestures for all three players (careful listeners will note that the violist is playing double stops, creating a four-part texture) with answers from the violin alone. The next idea is more assertive, but still simple in conception, with the violin playing short turning figures over arpeggios from the violist (who continues to work overtime to give the impression of a larger ensemble). From here, Beethoven begins to sneak in some disruptive elements, including accented offbeat chords and brief swerves into the minor. Order is quickly restored with an elegant second theme, scored as a duet for violin and viola over repeated notes in the cello. This section is closed off with a third theme, played by each of the instruments in turn (first viola alone, followed by the cello and the violin). After this opening section is repeated, the development section is surprisingly theatrical, given the delicacy of the themes. The opening idea is transformed into the minor and interrupted by a double forte interjection from the lower strings, and the simple turning figure becomes part of dramatic rising and falling lines. The return to the recapitulation is especially clever, as a high cello line distracts from a syncopated version of the opening gesture sneaking in from the violin.

The second movement also seems innocent enough at first. The movement starts with simple chords in two-note groups (viola double-stops again!), with the subtle surprise of a rest where one might expect the third group to start. This leads to a graceful melody in the violin, over arpeggios from the viola, and plucked notes from the cello (the cello is in the same rhythm as in the opening). After the violin and cello switch roles, it sounds as if Beethoven is repeating the beginning of the movement. After the two-note chords, the texture of cello pizzicato and viola arpeggios returns, but under a new melody from the violin in a distant key. Once again, more drama than we would expect.

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The third movement is labelled menuetto. It is a little fast for a courtly dance, but still gentler and more refined than a typical Beethovenian scherzo. The surprise in this movement comes in the trio, which begins with unadorned isolated notes from the violin (remember the two-note groups from the slow movement?) answered in octaves by the full group. This aggressively naive gesture seems an odd complement to the elegant menuetto.

The final movement is the sunniest of all, with a lively rondo theme in the upper register of the cello over a bagpipe drone accompaniment. Even here, the rustic melodies and frequent cello solos often turn to minor or lead to emphatic interruptions. The brilliant conclusion would surely have both impressed salon audiences and also been exhilarating for dilettante players.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) Piano Sonata in F Major, K. 332 (probably composed 1783, published 1784)

Mozart's Piano Sonata in F Major was most likely composed in 1783, about two years after he left the service of the Archbishop of Salzburg and relocated to Vienna. In the absence of a court or church appointment that could provide a steady income, Mozart was forced to piece together a living as a free-lance musician from multiple sources, almost all involving keyboard instruments. Even the operas that Mozart composed for the Viennese court featured the composer directing from the keyboard for the first performances. Mozart's most visible and lucrative interactions with the keyboard came in the many performances that he gave in Vienna in the 1780s, packed into the seasons of Advent and Lent. During Lent 1784, for instance, Mozart presented 23 concerts in 40 days, including four "academies" for his own benefit, and fifteen private concerts for various princes and counts. All of these concerts would have been played on Mozart's own beloved Anton Walter fortepiano, which he laboriously carted from event to event. There is no evidence, however, that keyboard sonatas were ever featured in Mozart's public performances in Vienna, at which the main attractions were newly-composed piano concertos and improvised variations on popular themes

The keyboard sonata fit into Mozart's life in different ways. Although Mozart did play piano sonatas in public earlier in his career in Salzburg and in Augsburg, and may have played them at aristocratic salons in Vienna, they do not seem to preserve his own virtuosity at the keyboard in the same way that the mature concertos do. The most famous Vienna concertos were composed for Mozart's own use and were not published during his lifetime. The keyboard sonatas, on the other hand, were primarily composed for

other people, whether Mozart's own students, or more generally for the market of amateur players who might purchase the published sheet music. The Sonata in F Major is from a group of three sonatas (including the Sonata in A Major with the famous "Turkish" Rondo) published in Vienna by Artaria in 1784 and was most probably intended to serve multiple purposes. Mozart had assembled a small studio of private students in his early years in Vienna, made up of aristocrats and highly accomplished amateurs; all women. These students would presumably have been the first ones to see the sonatas, and would have had exclusive access to them until Artaria published them the next year. Mozart's manuscript uses an unusual clef for the right-hand line, perhaps suggesting that he was training his students to read the clef, as well as to play the sonata. The title page of the published sheet music describes the sonatas as being intended for either harpsichord or fortepiano, reflecting Artaria's desire to reach as wide a group of potential customers as possible. Despite this, the first edition is full of dynamic marks and articulations that could not be realized on the harpsichord (these markings are not in the original manuscript).

The first movement of the sonata is unusual in being in triple meter (only five of Mozart's eighteen piano sonatas have first movements in triple meter), and even more so for not having the dance character of a menuet, which was something of a default character for 18th century instrumental music in three. The movement is even more striking for the number of different musical topics crammed into a relatively small space. The opening gesture has a graceful, lilting melody over an arpeggiated accompaniment that is answered with a brief whiff of academic counterpoint.

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The next phrase sits higher on the keyboard and sounds as if it could have been intended for Papageno's magic bells (had they existed in 1783), or have come from a music box. Mozart then suddenly veers into a stormy minor section that seems to have wandered in from a different piece altogether. This is enough variety for an entire sonata movement, and Mozart still hasn't arrived at the second theme. This theme, when it does appear, is finally in the courtly minuet character that we would have expected, but quickly turns to a developmental passage with stabbing bass notes and some metrical confusion.

The second movement does not have the rich assortment of different characters found in the opening movement but does provide contrast on a larger structural level. The formal plan of the movement is very simple. The first idea spins an elegant arched melody over gentle arpeggios, and a second thought is broken into shorter gestures over repeated notes in the left hand. Both ideas are repeated, and the movement comes to an end. In Mozart's manuscript, when he reaches the end of the second idea, he merely indicates that the player should return to the beginning of the movement and start over. However, in the published first edition, Mozart writes out embellishments to the melodies, of the sort that he presumably would have improvised himself, and of the sort that his students would learn to improvise, but that most players would have needed to have written out for them.

If the first movement was intended to train Mozart's students to express (or compose?) different musical affects, and the second movement was an exercise in improvised ornamentation, then the final movement might be lesson in finger dexterity and velocity. Brilliant running passages in sixteenth notes alternate with perky themes typical of 18th century rondos. The effect would have been even more striking on the keyboard instruments of Mozart's day, on which the opening gesture would have bumped up against the very top of the shorter keyboard.

Mozart's keyboard sonatas were not commercial successes when they were published. They were neither well-adapted to the technical abilities of amateur players, nor confined to the natural and pleasing characters considered most appropriate at the time. The genteel amateurs of the late 18th century preferred the sonatas of now-neglected composers like Leopold Kozeluh, who were much more willing to satisfy their expectation and desires. It is, of course, exactly those musical and technical complexities that frustrated Artaria's potential customers that have made Mozart's keyboard sonatas so effective for modern players and listeners.

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Edward Elgar (1857-1934) Piano Quintet in A Minor, Op. 84 (1918-19)

The Piano Quintet, along with the Violin Sonata and the String Quartet, is one of a group of three chamber works composed by Edward Elgar just at the end of the Great War. The appearance of three substantial chamber compositions in the same year is all the more striking, as these were Elgar's first significant small ensemble pieces, and even his unfinished or destroyed early attempts all dated from at least thirty years earlier. Also notable is the distinctly 19th century flavor of the works, marked most strongly by the styles of Johannes Brahms. As Elgar wrote of the Violin Sonata, "I fear it does not carry us any further, but it is full of golden sounds, and I like it." It may seem odd that an English composer would be carrying on Austro-German traditions in the wake of the War, but, aside from a brief period at the beginning of the War when German music disappeared from British orchestral programs, and when musicians of German heritage were swiftly removed from British orchestras, the music of Beethoven, Brahms and the other canonical Teutonic composers was performed throughout the conflict, and those composers remained the measure against which British musicians were evaluated. George Bernard Shaw felt the Piano Quintet was in the same vein as Beethoven's Coriolan Overture, and was the finest thing of that sort since Beethoven's Overture.

Like many Elgar works, the Piano Quintet is surrounded by a certain amount of dubious lore. Elgar seems to have been happy to cultivate an air of mystery around his works, and to encourage speculation about the sources and meanings of his musical material (this is, after all, the composer of the "Enigma" Variations). In this case, the lore mostly is attached to the first movement.

The first four notes, played in octaves by the piano, may come from a Salve Regina chant. According to Elgar's wife, the slow introduction evoked the spooky woods around the remote rural cottage where the Quintet was composed ("ghostly stuff," according to Elgar himself). There is also a tradition that the rather sexy second theme of the following Allegro section (violins in thirds, bouncing bows) is Spanish in character, and that that is connected to a legend that a nearby group of old, gnarled trees were the figures of Spanish monks, punished with lightning for sinful acts (even the existence of the monks is spurious, let alone the more colorful parts of the tale).

The second movement is rich and melodic, featuring one of Elgar's most noble and compelling melodies (which is high praise, indeed), first presented by the viola. A middle section is more personally passionate, with frequent tempo changes and indications that individual notes in melodies should be extended (especially in the cello) before the noble first section returns. The third and final movement opens with a slow introduction, in which material from the slow introduction of the first movement returns. The subsequent Allegro begins with a theme for the full quartet marked "singing and with dignity." A contrasting, syncopated theme in the piano is perhaps less dignified (as one critic would have it, "galumphing"), but, after a long transition based on the "Salve Regina" theme from the first movement, the main theme returns in all its glory, now promoted from "dignified" to "nobly."