

PROGRAM NOTE – BY NUVI MEHTA

Trio for Clarinet, Cello and Piano in B-flat Major, Op. 11 (composed 1797)
LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

By the time Beethoven wrote his Trio, Op. 11, Vienna knew him as both an ambitious, rising composer and a piano virtuoso celebrated for his improvisational abilities. It was at the first performance of the trio, in the home of his friend and disciple Count Ferdinand Ries, that Beethoven was challenged by a rival pianist and composer of the day, Daniel Steibelt (1765-1823). Steibelt had listened disdainfully to the Trio, in which the piano looms prominently but not overwhelmingly, and figured that Beethoven was no threat.

Eight days later, the two met at the Count's home. Following a performance of a quintet of his, Steibelt began to improvise on the same theme that forms the basis of the finale of Beethoven's Trio. *Pria ch'io l'impegno* was a currently popular tune from the opera *L'Amor Marinaro (The Corsair)* by Joseph Weigl (1777-1846). Outraged, Beethoven grabbed the cello part to Steibelt's quintet, set it upside-down on the piano's music stand, and began to pound out one of its themes with a single finger. His furious improvisations drove Steibelt from the room and the two remained bitter adversaries until their deaths.

That same Weigl tune gave rise to the trio's occasional nickname, the *Gassenhauer* or *Street Song* trio. It was variations on that tune that clarinetist Josef Beer (1744-1811) had requested from Beethoven in the first place. Having succumbed to popular opinion by appropriating this hit to further his career, Beethoven always remained unsatisfied with that movement, though he never penned a substitute. Another sign of his ambition was the work's dedication to Mozart's former patron, Countess Maria Wilhelmine von Thun, mother of his own friend and patron, Prince Lichnowsky.

A striking unison statement of the first theme opens the *Allegro con brio* (4/4); the second theme is introduced by a startling key change. Continuing the tonal adventure, the development begins with the second rather than the first theme. *Con espressione* is the marking of the *Adagio* (3/4), headed by the singing cello, then the clarinet. The minor-mode midsection, dominated by the piano, is followed by a varied repeat of the first part.

In the finale, Beethoven dismembers Weigl's ditty and reconstructs it nine different ways. First is a piano solo; second an unaccompanied clarinet and cello duet; third, a simple *con fuoco* trio. Variations four and five are minor and major renditions, respectively, of the theme. Six finds Beethoven playing with the imitation between the piano on one hand and the cello and clarinet on the other. Minor returns in the march-like seventh variation but retreats in the eighth, where jittery piano triplets sound under the melodic clarinet and cello. In the final variation, the trilling piano takes charge of a small development. A dancing 6/8 *Allegretto* coda concludes the journey.

Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 2 (composed 1889)
JOSEF SUK (1874-1935)

Josef Suk, the son-in-law and one-time favorite pupil of Antonín Dvořák, became a leading Czech composer, noted particularly for his chamber music. Though he also played piano and organ, the violin was his main instrument and he became second violinist in the well-known Czech quartet. Suk wrote this trio when he was only 15 years old, though he would make major revisions over the next several years, including replacing an entire movement. Under Dvořák's tutelage, he also substantially lightened the character of the third movement.

Sharp chords open the work, with a dotted rising figure in answer. The major-key second subject, introduced by the cello and marked "expressively," brings a lyrical contrast. The development section makes inventive use of the movement's two themes (Dvořák had helped Suk here) while gradually shifting into the key of C Major. The first subject is then heard again (now also in C Major), as is the second, before a coda finishes the movement.

The lovely Andante has a gentle, almost tango-like lilt. However, dynamic and harmonic contrast comes at the heart of the movement (again this was on the advice of Dvořák) as the rhythm begins to suggest a dance of a more resolute nature. Suk's revised finale, now a Vivace in 6/8 time, comprises a fast-moving, staccato figure (in the home key of C minor) and a contrastingly lyrical second subject.

Piano Trio No. 3 in F minor, Op. 65 (composed in 1883)
ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

Dvořák was deeply saddened by the death of his mother in 1882, and her death seems to hang over his Op. 65 Trio. The work has been called Dvořák's most sorrowful piece. The first movement opens in solemnity moving quickly into a stormy minor theme. This mood pervades throughout except for a respite during a somewhat gentler second theme introduced by the cello.

The outer sections of the second movement show the Nationalism, which was finally winning popularity for Dvořák, as they resemble a Czech dance, called the dumka. (Dvořák's next Piano Trio, the so-called *Dumky*, would be built of several of these dances.) The middle section features sustained melodic lines, though its mood will gradually darken as the rhythmic energy returns. The third section is an exact repeat of the opening dance.

The Poco adagio slow movement is one of Dvořák's most tender and lyrical creations. It features wonderful interaction between the two string instruments. The calm is disturbed by an accented theme but this soon yields to more lyricism. Eventually a solo passage for the piano, hitherto largely an accompanist to the violin and cello, ushers in a coda which dwindles into nothing.

The calm is shattered by the onset of the finale. Its main theme is a furiant, an exhilarating Czech folk

dance in which two measures of three beats alternate with three bars of two beats. Recurrences of this furiant alternate with returns to the storms of the first movement before a quiet prayer leads to a triumphant major-key coda.