

Discovering the Classical String Trio

The Vivaldi project

Elizabeth Field, violin
Allison Edberg Nyquist, violin and viola
Stephanie Vial, cello

Sonata da Camera a tre, op. 1, no. 2 in e minor
Due Violini e Violone o Cembalo

Antonio Vivaldi
(1678 – 1741)

Grave - Corrente Allegro - Giga Allegro - Gavotta Allegro

Sonata in D major, B.36 (c. 1755-1762)
for two violins and basso

Johann Christian Bach
(1735-1782)

Allegro assai
Allegro grazioso

Trio, op. 2, no. 4 in D major (1760)
per due violini et basso

Luigi Boccherini
(1743-1805)

Adagio
Allegro spiritoso
Fuga allegro

Divertimento in B minor, H. V:3 (c. 1750-1766)
for two violins and basso

Franz Joseph Haydn
(1732-1809)

Adagio
Allegro
Tempo di Menuet

Intermission

Trio in F major, op. 20, no. 2 (1778)
for a violin, tenor and violoncello

Felice Giardini
(1716-1796)

Andante
Adagio
Allegro assai

Trio concertant in A major, op. 33, no. 1 (c. 1780's)
pour violon, alto et violoncelle

Giuseppe Cambini
(1746-1825)

Allegro con grazia
Moderato arioso e cantabile

It is curious that only a few Classical string trios survive as celebrated works for today's performers and audiences. These are Beethoven's op. 9 set of three trios, the two youthful works of Schubert (the first unfinished), and the grand six-movement *Divertimento in E flat* by Mozart, notably the sole representative from the 18th century. All are truly masterful works, frequently performed and recorded, but which naturally beg the question "Is this really all there is?" A little research quickly unearthed a whole history of string trios from many of the 18th century's most prolific and eminent composers. Those represented on this concert alone collectively contributed more than 150 works, revealing the

string trio not only as a flexible and exciting genre in its own right, but also as playing an important role in the story of chamber music.

Why such a large body of string trios has been essentially ignored by musicians and audiences for over 200 years lies at least in part with the extraordinary success of the string quartet, which would virtually supplant the string trio and dominate string chamber music throughout the 19th century. As a result, the string trio largely came to be viewed as a kind of poor cousin to the quartet. But what a shame to ignore the extraordinary compositional variety to be found among string trios—many of them written to be played by connoisseurs for connoisseurs, and presenting a great variety of textures, characters, and astonishing instrumental techniques.

We begin this evening's concert with the Classical string trio's predecessor, the trio sonata, one of the most important and highly popular forms of instrumental music throughout the Baroque period, and as such, a key repository for musical ideas and innovations. The reasons behind the trio sonata's popularity are many, not least of which include the enticing, virtuosic violin playing coming out of Italy—and which is very much in evidence in **Antonio Vivaldi's** op. 1 trio sonatas. Vivaldi brought to these works all the infectious zest and enthusiasm which are the hallmarks of his playing, as well as his expertise in both vocal and instrumental compositional forms. The opening *Grave* of no. 2 in E minor combines a beautiful vocal line with lush instrumental embellishments, which is then followed by three dances, each with a distinct character combining technical flair, rhythmic energy, and lively dialogue between the instruments.

The trio sonata is a trio in the sense that it is written for two melodic instruments (often two violins) and *basso continuo*, improvised harmonies above an independent bass line. But while the *continuo* counts as one voice of the trio, the number of instruments used to produce can vary considerably: keyboard and/or lute, theorbo or guitar, and/or cello or viola da gamba. In the op. 1 sonatas, Vivaldi suggests that the *continuo* may be played by *violone* (a term applied to a variety of bowed instruments including cello) or *cembalo* (harpsichord). It is rare to hear these works without the improvised keyboard part, which is so much a part of the baroque trio texture, but this kind of flexibility is not completely unheard of. (Corelli for instance, offers the same option of harpsichord or cello in his violin sonatas.) Neither is the use of a *basso continuo* entirely left behind as the cello part becomes more fully integrated into the texture of the string trio and quartet. Indeed, it can be difficult to know what common practice would have been. As in the case of J.C. Bach's trios, some include keyboard *continuo* figures above the bass lines, some clearly indicate harpsichord in the title, while others, like the next work in our program, indicate neither.

The D major *Sonata for Two Violins and Basso*, B. 36, one of a set of six by **Johann Christian Bach**, the highly versatile composer and youngest son of J.S. Bach, grabs the listener from its very start. The sudden dynamic contrasts of the opening *Allegro assai*, combined with the ebullient sixteenth notes from the second violin, keep us on the edge of our seats throughout the delightful romp. The minuet-like *Allegro grazioso*, which follows, is as charming and elegantly phrased as its title implies. While little is known about the history of these trios, it is difficult to imagine that they could belong to any period other than Bach's years in Italy. During this transformative period (1755-1762), Bach not only abandoned his Protestant faith, but also fell in love with and began composing opera (the first of his family to do so). Indeed, one can almost feel Bach thinking in the fuller orchestration and the dramatic drive of an Italian overture or symphony.

There is no question but that the young virtuoso cellist **Luigi Boccherini** had his own instrument in mind for the bass line of his earliest works, the six op. 2 *Tercetti*. *The trios display Boccherini's*

distinctive combination of delicate string textures and intricate melodic and rhythmic figurations. The timbre of the D major trio's opening Adagio is immediately striking, a combination of the cello's high tessitura, alternating pairings of instruments, and double stop techniques. In the Allegro Spiritoso, Boccherini suddenly transports us to the world of an early symphony by the much admired Haydn. But again, the textures and melodic twists and turns are all Boccherini. The Fuga Allegro pits the voices playfully against each other, one rising as another falls. The majority of Boccherini's nearly 50 trios—alongside over 100 string quintets, nearly 100 string quartets, numerous symphonies, concerti, and other stage, vocal, and chamber music works—are written for the same combination of 2 violins and cello. Only the op. 14 and op. 38 sets are scored instead for violin, viola, and cello.

Joseph Haydn is beloved by string players as a kind of “father” to chamber music, his 68 extraordinary string quartets holding pride of place. It is likely because the more fully voiced quartet achieved such tremendous success that Haydn's 21 *Divertimenti à tre*, which predate the op. 9 quartets, are so often overlooked. (Of course both of these numbers pale in comparison to the 162 string trios he composed for baryton, viola, and cello.) All 18 surviving trios are written for two violins and (presumably) cello, except no. 8 which uses viola in place of the second violin. The violin tends to dominate more often than not, and no. 3, the only surviving trio in a minor key, is no exception. The opening *Adagio* is pure opera, the first violin testing the limits of its vocal range while alternating dramatically between passionate recitative and more rhythmic *arioso* expressions. The following *Allegro* is Haydn at his playful best, full of rhythmic energy and toying with our expectations. The *Tempo di Menuet*, no mere dance movement, is ready with theatrical drama and contrast much like the *divertimento's* operatic opening.

The Italian born composer and violinist **Giuseppe Maria Cambini** made his career in Paris and is one of the most prolific composers contributing to the development of both the string quartet and string trio in France. Cambini wrote at least 24 trios for two violins and cello, 18 for violin, viola, and cello, and at least 12 for two violins and viola, a combination which both J. Stamitz and J.C. Bach (and much later Anton Dvorak) also used. Cambini titles a number of his trios, including the op. 33 set, *Trios Concertants*, capitalizing on the light, cheerful, and highly popular *Symphonies Concertantes* (a combination of symphony and concerto, of which Cambini composed 82). Cambini was adept at knowing how to please his audience, but this is not to diminish the undeniable *expertise and considerable deftness with which he composed in the musical language of his day.* The first violin beckons us with simple alternating eighth notes into the charming *Allegro con grazia* of the A major trio. The ear is treated to a variety of thematic ideas and one gets glimpses of the language that Beethoven would later use. The *Moderato arioso e cantabile* consists of a set of virtuosic variations, with each *concertante* soloist given a voice and character distinctly its own.

A European tour in 1751 brought the Italian virtuoso violinist **Felice Giardini** to England, where he would remain for over 30 years and where the majority of his works (primarily chamber music) would be published. Giardini wrote three sets of six trios for violin, viola, and cello, and two sets, published as late as 1790, with the *basso continuo* of a Baroque trio sonata: one for two violins and *basso*, and one offering the option of cello or *fortepiano* (the harpsichord's highly popular replacement). The opening *Andante* of the trio in F major, op. 20 is warm and inviting. Under a graceful violin tune, the cello and the viola, with its syncopated chords, create an accompaniment as rich as any string quartet. The instruments share almost equally in the melodic material throughout this movement and the following lush *Adagio*, the cellist in particular being called upon to use the very latest in high register techniques. The *Allegro assai*, a lively set of variations in rondo form, is like Cambini's set of variations, a kind of triple concerto allowing each player in turn to display their technical skill and artistry.

