

## Beethoven Piano Trio in B-flat, Op. 97 (“Archduke”)

*Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)*

The Archduke Trio is one of a remarkable series of masterpieces written during Beethoven’s middle period. By 1808, growing deafness had practically ended his career as a pianist. He had been offered a position as Kapellmeister to the “King of Westphalia” (Jerome Bonaparte), when a financial subsidy quickly arranged by three noble patrons (Archduke Rudolph, Prince Lobkowitz, and Prince Kinsky), persuaded Beethoven to remain Vienna, where he could devote himself wholly to composition.

In his earlier period, Beethoven had been content to adhere to the classical principals laid down by his predecessors, but the world and his view of it was changing. He now knew the real meaning of tragedy. Despondent over his deafness and troubled by the Napoleonic occupation of Vienna, which not only had upset the life pattern of the entire Viennese citizenry but had also affected the fortunes of his aristocratic supporters, Beethoven’s work began to take on a new intensity. With the rise of the middle class, freedom of expression began to replace the rigid formality of the past. That suited Beethoven’s frame of mind very well. He needed an outlet for his feelings and, as his American biographer Alexander Wheelock Thayer, wrote: “It is as though beneath some clear surface, his music allows us to penetrate the depths of his soul.”

The *B-flat Piano Trio*, composed in 1811 and know as the “*Archduke*”, is a product of the composer’s new maturity. From the beginning, he had developed a warm relationship with Archduke Rudolph, who started out as his pupil, but soon became the friend and patron to whom many of his masterpieces would be dedicated. These included, for instance, not only such works as the *B-flat Piano Trio* , but also the *Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos*, several piano sonatas. (*Les Adieux*, *Hammerklavier and Opus 111*), the *Missa Solemnis*, and the *Grosse Fugue*. The relationship between artist and pupil would endure from the winter of 1803-04 until the composer’s death in 1827.

According to Beethoven's amenuensis and biographer, Ferdinand Ries, the composer caused a great embarrassment in the Imperial household when he first came to give the 15-year old prince his lessons. Beethoven's scorn for protocol and court etiquette is well known. After some vain attempts by courtiers to polish the master's unacceptable behavior, he forced his way into the Archduke's presence, flatly declaring the "while he had greatest reverence for his person, he could not trouble himself to observe all the regulations which were daily thrust upon him. The Archduke laughed goodnatureedly and commanded that Beethoven be permitted to go his own way undisturbed." The Archduke obviously loved music, was talented and appreciated what his teacher was doing for him. A warm relationship developed between the two, and the Archduke, who later became the Archbishop of Olmütz, continued to be Beethoven's most devoted patron and friend, always treating him with consideration, affectionate understanding and good-natured indulgence.

*B-flat Piano Trio, Op. 97* had been sketched out in 1810, but Beethoven did nothing with it until the following year when he was able to complete it in three weeks, March 3-26. The work was probably revised later, for it was not performed until April 14, 1814 at a benefit concert for a military charity in the hall of the Hotel zum Römischen Kaiser in Vienna. Beethoven had been asked to play the difficult piano part and unfortunately consented. While the string players were Vienna's best: Ignaz Schuppanzigh, violin, and Joseph Linke, cello, Beethoven's day had long passed. Ludwig Spohr, who attended a rehearsal in Beethoven's rooms, wrote, "It was not a treat...the pianoforte was badly out of tune." As for Beethoven, "He minded little since he did not hear it" and "there was scarcely anything left of the virtuosity of the artist which had formerly been so greatly admired." Moscheles, who attended the concert, wrote in his diary, "His playing ...was wanting in clarity and precision, but I observed many traces of the grand style of playing which I had long recognized in his compositions."

In the "Archduke" Trio, and for the first time, Beethoven had successfully transferred his mature symphonic style to chamber music. This proud work achieves heights to which few chamber works can ever

hope to aspire. With stately simplicity, the piano gives out the first measure of the *Allegro moderato's* opening theme and then passes it to the cello. Several bridge passages make the connection to the second subject, which is characterized by lightly descending staccato passages. Beethoven reverses the usual order of things by replacing the expected slow movement with a sprightly and joyous *Scherzo (Allegro)*. A sudden darkness hovers about the movement's *trio* section as it slithers about mysteriously, only to arrive with a sudden, hearty outburst into full daylight.

The two-section hymn-like theme that opens the third movement (*Andante*) is radiantly beautiful. Beethoven discovered many glorious possibilities for enriching it, and does so in four extended variations. Eventually the theme will return in a simpler form, and will be spun out tenderly, ending in a fragile, but firm, affirmation of its original mood, at the same time lulling us into a state of serene introspection. With the sublime moments of the preceding movement still lingering, the Finale (*Allegro moderato*) makes a startling entrance, and we are back in mundane territory. But we are flexible, and the real world is not without its bright side. We are soon caught up in the brilliant merry-making of a five-part rondo that makes unusual demands on the virtuosity of the three players.

*By Margery Derdeyn*