Byron Schenkman & Friends

Beethoven Archduke Trio

Notes on the Program by Byron Schenkman

In 1794 a young pianist and aspiring composer named Ludwig van Beethoven published his Opus One: three trios for piano, violin, and cello. With these trios Beethoven established himself as an artist who would consistently go beyond the norms of what even the best composers of his time were doing. Beethoven’s teacher Joseph Haydn, and his idol Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, had already expanded the trio from its origins as a simple accompanied keyboard sonata (suitable for amateurs to play at home) into a sophisticated conversation among three instrumentalists. Beethoven took the form out of the drawing room altogether, writing for three instruments with the kind of grandeur others had reserved only for large-scale symphonic works.

Beethoven’s trio in E-flat Major, op. 1, no.1, is a joyful work full of good humor and musical jokes, but also luscious harmony, and technical challenges in all three parts. Although Beethoven is mainly known as an instrumental composer who wrote relatively little vocal music, his work often seems to be inspired by the human voice. This is especially apparent in the movements marked “cantabile” – in a songlike manner. The three “cantabile” movements on tonight’s program could be heard as prototypes for the expressive character pieces of the 19th-century, such as Felix Mendelssohn’s “Songs without Words.”

Most of Beethoven’s music is quite joyful. Even pieces which start out in a tragic vein usually end in triumph – the famous fifth symphony is just one such example. The sonata in C Minor for violin and piano is unusual in that it starts and ends in a dark and stormy mood, although even here there are rays of hope along the way.

Much of Beethoven’s work was dedicated to royal patrons, some of whom became close personal friends of the composer. The three works on tonight’s program were dedicated respectively to the Prince Lichnowsky, Tsar Alexander I of Russia, and Archduke Rudolph of Austria. The youngest child of the Holy Roman Emperor, Archduke Rudolph was a student, patron, and friend of Beethoven’s, and was the dedicatee of several of the composer’s most monumental works including the “Emperor” Concerto and the *Missa Solemnis*. The “Archduke Trio” was the last work Beethoven played in public before loss of hearing destroyed his performing career. In spite of the challenges Beethoven was undoubtedly facing, this is a work of supreme triumph and joy.