Leonard Bernstein: *Piano Trio* (1937)

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990), one of the most renowned American musicians of the twentieth century, opened his compositional portfolio with this piano trio. Composed as part of his undergraduate music studies under Walter Piston at Harvard University, Bernstein's *Piano Trio* never saw the light of a public stage until over four decades later when it was finally published in 1979. Although not chronologically the first work published by Bernstein, it was the earliest manuscript of his that continues to be performed today, and it was first premiered by a trio comprising three of Bernstein's fellow students, all of whom were women: Mildred Spiegel (piano), Dorothy Rosenberg (violin), and Sarah Kruskall (cello), members of the Madison Trio.

Composers—like most artists—tend to dismiss their own early works as being "immature" or "juvenile." Bernstein was no different and he refused to take his collegiate piano trio seriously well into his career. But Bernstein's own diffidence need not dissuade us from appreciating the work of art that the trio is. For instead of slavishly abiding by the rules of classical (*i.e.,* sonata-allegro) form, Bernstein here takes traditional notions of structure and turns them on their head. While the opening movement does contain a fugue in the style of JS Bach, the interest of the movement is not at all in the fugue *qua* fugue, but rather in how it empties out the content and context of the fugue, leaving behind only a surface, an empty vessel into which he pours his creative energies. The first movement is all about Bernstein's experimentation with timbre, in which he juxtaposes various techniques, rhythms, and registers to create what is essentially a musical painting. Eschewing the classical fugue's self-indulgence (most listeners might not even realize there *is* a fugue), he instead follows its rules of counterpoint to create an aesthetic surface resembling the fugue, painting musical figurations upon the fugue's blank canvas.

In the opening movement, which moves from *Adagio non troppo* to *Allegro vivace* and finally *Largamente*, Bernstein brings together his own musical influences, foreshadowing the soundworlds that his compositions would eventually inhabit. The cello begins the story, with the violin gradually joining in on the conversation and the piano finally taking over with a reworked explanation of the cello's theme. Then the thematic hot potato is once again passed to the cello which now sings out a rhapsody while the violin shyly asserts its presence. The game continues, passing the main voice from one instrument to the next until finally the three sound together after a short *pizzicato* interlude in the strings. In this movement, Bernstein clearly separates the piano from the strings, instituting two layers that play off each other, the violinist and cellist against the right and left hands of the pianist. It is only in the *Allegro vivace* that we hear all three instruments sounding out the trio's full texture together in a playful dance; the *Largamente* coda brings us back full circle to the pensive mood of the opening.

The second movement, *Tempo di marcia* begins with a coy *pizzicato* in the violin, whose hammered timbre the piano imitates with a highly affected *staccato*. Once the cello joins the party, we start on a stilted march, with the strong beats in all the wrong places. You might consider this march to be equally at home on the concert stage and as the

background music to a Sunday morning cartoon. The story coming all the more alive as the piano, violin, and cello all continue their conversation from the first movement, seemingly oblivious that they are but characters on the stage, playing out a scene with all the seriousness of a Bernsteinian *scherzo*.

In the final movement, *Largo—Allegro vivo e molto ritmico*, a grave introduction gives way to a playful *Allegro vivo,* wherein the cello takes the first turn at being the *molto ritmico* engine to push forth the group. What follows is a lively *moto perpetuo*, in which all three instruments take turns playing all roles, melodic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal. The movement simultaneously demonstrates the young Bernstein's mastery of classical techniques, captures in music his youthful ebullience, and gives us as listeners the satisfaction of formal finality from which the first two movements shied clear. The cello's bombastic cadenza before the final coda coupled with the piano's self-satisfied *glissando* foreshadow the dramatic and unapologetic career that Bernstein had just begun.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

A young Leonard Bernstein

Source: LeonardBernstein.com

Gaspar Cassadó: *Piano Trio in C Major* (1926)

Gaspar Cassadó i Moreu (1897-1966) was a Catalan composer and cellist active in both roles throughout his life. He was a protégé of the legendary Pau Casals, though the two had a falling out after World War II. Cassadó spent most of his life as a touring cellist, performing throughout Europe and the United States for over 30 years with the singer and pianist Giulietta Gorigiani. Fiercely proud of his heritage, his compositions hold a distinctly Iberian flair, and a number are even based on stories from Catalan folklore. Though he composed many works under his own name, he also participated in the tradition of musical hoaxes, wherein composers would falsely attribute their works to slightly lesser-known composers of the past, claiming that they had stumbled upon the manuscript and had done editorial work to present them to the public. The most well-known example of Cassadó's misattributions is his *Toccata* (1925), which he claimed was originally composed by Girolamo Frescobaldi, a seventeenth-century Baroque composer and keyboardist.

His *Piano Trio in C Major* was composed in 1926, after a stint in Paris following World War I. When in Paris, Cassadó studied with bigwigs including Maurice Ravel and Manuel de Falla, and befriended the composer Alfredo Casella who helped further expand his professional network after his studies. Alongside Albéniz and Turina, Cassadó proudly wrote melodies hearkening back to Spanish folk music, which in turn fed into the growing sentiments of Spanish nationalism across Europe in the interbellum.

The first movement of the *Piano Trio* begins *Allegro risoluto*, pushing the cellist to the extremes of virtuosity as he doubles the violin's melody, spanning the stretch of its range. The angular and dramatic opening chords evoke the movements of Spanish dances, and this resonance stretches across the entirety of the work. After the fiery introduction, we venture into the realm of *Allegro ma non troppo*, in staid contrast to the drama that immediately preceded it. Cassadó maintains a large amount of parallel voice leading between the two strings, reminding us of the melody's Spanish folk roots. The ending returns to the bombastic nature of the opening, with the strings imitating the full-throated lyricism of a Spanish tenor while the piano weaves in and out of the texture, alternating virtuosic filigree with unexpected harmonies.

The second movement, *Tempo moderato e pesante,* is something of a rhapsodic scherzo. Filled with *portamenti* galore, the Iberian flair continues into this movement, and all three instruments show off their technical prowess one after the other. In this movement, the piano gains a greater degree of independence from the strings than in the first movement and engages in an involved conversation with them. Solo lines are passed from one instrument to the next, giving each a chance to shine. The *Allegro giusto* is a sudden turn to lyricism, and here a duet texture prevails. As the violin begins its rhapsody, the cello provides a *flautando* ostinato backing, and the two switch places to give the cello a moment of glory. The piano sometimes pops in with short statements but otherwise keeps the peace.

The final movement is an operatic tour de force, with the telling performance direction: *Recitativo. Moderato ed appassionato – Rondo – Allegro vivo*. An opening recitative in the strings is followed by a dance in triple meter, with the piano providing a constant ostinato to back it up. Beginning with the violin, all three instruments trade spots in the limelight, but the triple rhythm drives through it all. Cassadó only breaks from his strict meter at the very end, leading up to a violent coda in which all reason is left by the wayside.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

A young Gaspar Cassadó

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Camille Saint-Saëns: *Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 92* (1892)

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) was one of the most influential French composers of the nineteenth century, and his works were often described as masterpieces demonstrating the full range of a given instrument, particularly keyboard instruments on which he himself was an acclaimed virtuoso. One looks to his *Organ Symphony* and the *Carnaval des Animaux* as stellar examples of his ability to explore the furthest reaches of our orchestras' timbral capabilities. In 1892, he composed his second *Piano Trio*, two decades after his first, and it saw the light of the stage on December 7th of the same year at the Salle Érard in Paris. Isidore Philipp played the keys, Henri Berthelier the violin, and Jules Loeb the cello. Organized into five movements beginning and ending in the key of E minor, the trio was described as "black with notes and black in mood" by its composer, who desired to show of the depth of his compositional voice with this work. Nonetheless, this trio is not the result of Saint-Saëns succumbing to the Parisian wave of *Wagnermania*, but rather the French composer affirming the beauty and drama to be found in composing music as if it were a painting, translucent layer upon translucent layer adding up to a shimmering canvas of color.

Allegro ma non troppo: The piano begins with a dramatic, rhythmic, and virtuosic series of arpeggiations that capture the listener's ear from the very first note with their intensity. Over top of this, the violin and cello add a sonorous and increasingly rhapsodic melody. For Saint-Saëns's compositions, not only does the pianist need to have dexterity and a delicate touch but also needs to serve as the musical foundation for the comparatively simple melodies he layers on top. Most importantly, the pianist must be an incomparable virtuoso of her instrument, just as Saint-Saëns himself, capable of maintaining a filigreed *moto perpetuo* simultaneously taking pains to highlight a different voice in the score at any given moment. This sensitivity to the piano's role in the trio (and even in larger ensembles) is what gives Saint-Saëns's music its characteristic brilliance. His melodies, meanwhile, contain the repertoire's greatest earworms.

Allegretto: Following on the heels of this monumental opening movement, the second movement is but a short breath of fresh air, a passing interlude to help us reset. Written in a 5/8 meter, this is no simple *minuet*, but a cheery *danse de salon*. The violin and piano start the dance with a lift in their step, soon joined by the cello. Imagine two dancers clad in their finest ballroom finery taking center stage on the parquet dance floor. They begin with a demure introduction, exploding into an intense flurry of steps as the piano reclaims the limelight. Through it all, we never lose sight of their off-kilter 5/8 meter. A series of variations on this opening theme follows, through which our dancers flit from one style to another in a showcase of virtuosity.

Andante con moto: The piano begins with a heart wrenching descending motif in A♭ major, mirrored by the cello whose statement is finished by the violin. This motivic cell forms the basic unit of the slow movement, and all three instruments pass it back and forth, slowly adding to it and fleshing it out. But we never stray too far from this basic cell,

and the movement eventually settles into a peaceful reverie as the descending figure echoes back and forth across the stage.

Grazioso, poco allegretto: Another dance, this time in a more traditional 3/8 time, herein the piano takes on the first melodic statement while the strings provide a chordal backdrop. Then it turns into a game of cat and mouse between the pianist's right hand, the violin, and the cello as they delightedly waltz across the stage.

Allegro: A unison G opens up to a B major chord. Then, *silence*. The blackest of black moods is brewing in Saint-Saëns's mind as he dreams up the melodic cell with which the piano re-enters. This stilted tune is dark, self-absorbed, even a little creepy. The strings join this hollow scalar tune in unison, leaving no room for the wholesome and full texture of Saint-Saëns's more characteristic counterpoint. The strings then break off into a fugal texture, imitative entrances resulting in many false starts that fizzle back into nothingness. The piano continues its heavily filigreed counterpoint beneath it all. A restatement of the opening tune across the entire trio leads us into the second half of the movement, where the entire texture is noticeably lighter. But Saint-Saëns then opens up to the nearly orchestral texture of the full trio, exploiting the sonic resonances created when all four voices (both piano hands counted separately) sing out in perfect unison. A fairytale-like interlude leads us to the flamboyant coda, where all three instruments show off the full range of their skills, ending the show with a resounding E minor chord.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Camille Saint-Saëns

Source: Tchaikovsky Research