Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: *Trio in C Major K. 548*

A name like Mozart's (1756-1791) needs no introduction, but perhaps the same cannot be said for his *Piano Trio in C Major*, the second of two trios he composed in the summer of 1788. The same year also saw the premiere of two of his most well-known symphonies, numbers 39 and 40. However 1788 was also a personally difficult year for the prolific composer: it marked the beginning of yet another Habsburg-Ottoman War, he faced increasing financial stress due to the lack of aristocratic patronage of music, his wife Constanze was ill, his fourth child died in infancy, and his family relocated to the outskirts of Vienna in an effort to save money. Yet for Mozart, personal afflictions rarely found their way into his musical output and the troubles plaguing his life had little to do with his musical language. Extraordinarily, it is just a few decades later that Robert Schumann's music came to be defined almost exclusively by the state of his mental health—a great disjuncture in the ways that we analyze the music of the past.

While early piano trios of the Classical era focused almost exclusively on the piano as the primary instrument (the string parts were little more than doubles for the piano), Mozart's *C Major Trio* was a major step towards the independent counterpoint and virtuosic writing for all voices that we see in the trios composed by even the next generation of composers: Beethoven and Schubert. Although the piano still takes pride of place, the cello and violin both break free from the shackles of the piano as accompanimental figures and take on their own parts, even when they are not holding the melody. The first performances of the *C Major Trio* remain shrouded in mystery, with no record of a public premiere. Instead, we might assume that Mozart composed it for a musical *salon*, where Viennese musical minds gathered to share in their love of chamber music.

The now famous painting of Haydn playing a string quartet by Julius Schmid, a prime example of the Viennese musical *salon*. Source: Wikimedia Commons

The first movement, *Allegro*, begins with a classic Mozart opening, with all three instruments stating the first theme in perfect octaves. The piano then takes off with the first full statement of the primary theme, followed by the violin as the cello outlines the harmonies with an active bass line. The piano then shines out with virtuosic passages in both hands, grounding the trio's melodic trajectory. The development sees the piano retain its importance, preparing each new statement of the theme, and answered each time by the strings. The second movement, *Andante cantabile* builds upon a tonic F in the strings. The piano sings out a walking theme—simple and unaffected scalar motion around the tonic—after which the violin and cello follow with their own iterations of the counter theme. The texture of this movement is relatively sparse, rarely taking advantage of the four available voices (violin, cello, and both piano hands) simultaneously. In the development, the violin briefly takes the reins from the piano, and alternates playful scalar runs with the cello as the piano steadily continues with its melodic material. The final movement, *Allegro*, continues the textural hierarchy of the first movement, although the cello finally receives a little bit more of the spotlight. Imitative counterpoint in *stretto fugal* passages highlight each individual instrument further. At times, one might even experience a certain disconnect between the mood of the piano and the strings, as if two different conversations are taking place simultaneously. The strings' moody melody is layered beneath the piano's exuberant runs, giving forward momentum to what could otherwise drag on. The coda gives the piano the spaces to show off its most vibrant runs, but the piece still draws back the reins to end on an elegant and manicured final phrase.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Clara Schumann: *Trio in G Minor, Op. 17*

"There is nothing greater than the joy of composing something oneself, and then listening to it." – Clara Schumann, writing in her diary after the first rehearsal of her *Trio*

Clara Wieck-Schumann (1819-1896) is often referenced by either of her two surnames, either as the heiress to the Wieck piano empire or as the wife of her renowned husband, the composer Robert Schumann. Sometimes she is even described as the object of Johannes Brahms's secret affections. Far more rarely is she discussed on the merits of her own talents, as both a successful concert pianist and a gifted composer. Outliving her husband by forty years, she went on to continue her concert appearances until 1891. Having developed her own technique on the instrument to a science, she passed on her knowledge to future generations of pianists as a teacher at Dr. Hoch's Konservatorium in Frankfurt, a post she held until 1892. We owe much of modern recital culture to Clara's own influence on the stage, from the pianist as focal point of the stage to the charisma attributed to the soloist. Though modern piano recitals rarely include the practice of "preluding" (playing short riffs and improvisatory sneak peeks before the downbeat), Clara's impact on the pianist's concert comportment is visible even a century later.

Among her compositions, the *Trio in G Minor, Op. 17* stands as testament to her gifts as a musical *auctor*. In fact, Clara composed her trio a full year before Robert began his first foray into the genre. Squinting at the score, we might discern a few similarities between the compositional choices made by Clara, and those of her husband Robert and even the couple's musical pupil, Johannes Brahms. Play with classical sonata-allegro form, dense counterpoint, and the emergence of a tonal color palette are some of the key characteristics shared by the three German musicians. Clara originally intended to dedicate the *Trio* to her close friend, Fanny Mendelssohn, but the latter's untimely passing in 1847 led Clara to leave the dedication blank. Clara Schumann premiered the work as the pianist while on tour in Vienna in the winter of 1847.

Allegro moderato: The *Trio* begins *in medias res*, eschewing the expository material so central to Classical and early Romantic works. Instead, the violin grabs you by the hand and takes you along on a journey through a tonal colorscape, the piano and cello now following its lead. Clara Schumann was a virtuosic pianist herself, and thus did not shirk from writing a complicated part for the instrument. But where in Mozart's *Trio* the piano shone front and center as the primary melodic voice, here the substantial piano part often finds itself playing second fiddle to the violin's uncomplicated tunes. The simplicity of the melodies gives the counterpoint space to be active and harmonically interesting. Clara's piano *Trio* is a masterclass in orchestration—unlike similar chamber works by her husband's protégé, Brahms where contrapuntal complexity reigns supreme. Where

Brahms's musical language verges on being overly dense, Clara's writing leaves just enough space for the melody to shimmer at the forefront of the texture, no matter how virtuosic the inner and lower voices might be.

Scherzo, tempo di menuetto: Rolling along into the *scherzo*, Clara focuses on a simple motif: a sixteenth note followed by a dotted eighth note. This reversal of the traditional figure is just enough to constantly upset our metrical grounding, lifting us off into a light dance as we spin round and round the ballroom floor. The *Trio* section takes on a decidedly morose tone as the cello takes the lead and builds up to a heart wrenching octave leap.

Andante: Following on the heels of the playful minuet, the piano commands our attention in the brooding opening of the *Andante*. Here, rhythm is not the primary driver of musical interest, but rather the harmonies as Clara takes us between G major and E minor with practiced ease. After setting the harmonic groundwork, the violin enters with a lament to which the cello adds its own morose voice. The two sing together of lost love until the violin resolves to move on to greener pastures with heroic determination. The transition is underpinned by a syncopated rhythm which the cello doubles and the piano expertly weaves between the two narrative modes: heroic and elegiac.

Allegretto: Once more the violin begins our journey in a manner similar to the opening hand pulling of the *Allegro moderato*. Frolicking through the leaves in the forest, dappled sunlight is reflected in the continuous sixteenth-note runs in the piano which peek out over the lush string melodies every few beats. The different textures overlap into a colorful landscape, the different timbres of the piano, cello, and violin each worked into an infinitely nuanced musical language.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Clara Schumann

Source: Wikimedia Commons

Sergei Rachmaninoff: *Trio élégiaque No. 1 in G Minor*

Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943) was a bit of a mischievous teenager. He was also possibly one of the St. Petersburg Conservatory's laziest students, who excelled at skipping class and failing his coursework. His family, concerned for his future, decided to transfer him to the Moscow Conservatory, where he would study under the iron gaze of Nikolai Zverev. The change did him wonders! Instead of being the lowest ranked student in the school, Rachmaninoff rose through the ranks and graduated with the conservatory's highest honors in three years. While at Moscow, he took a great liking to another professor of composition, Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. Tchaikovsky was a source of inspiration to the young Rachmaninoff and was one of his biggest mentors and cheerleaders throughout his schooling. The goofy young boy was gone, replaced by a diligent student of the art of music, who faithfully practiced the piano for three hours every single day.

The *Trio élégiaque* was the first of two such pieces Rachmaninoff composed, both in honor of his erstwhile musical mentor: Tchaikovsky. The first one—composed in 1892 at the young age of nineteen—was a homage to Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 1*. Constructed in a series of twelve episodes, each half ending in a heroic theme, Rachmaninoff's *Trio élégiaque* is a case study in musical form. He opens with the cello and the violin alternating their open strings, setting up a tonal wave that gains in rhythmic intensity until the piano's entrance. In fact, the four opening notes in the piano (G-A-B-D) are a transposed inversion of the opening notes in the French horn in Tchaikovsky's *First Piano Concerto*, drawing our ears to Rachmaninoff's inspiration with a subtle diegetic nod. The opening *Lento lugubre* is a *barcarolle* of sorts, taking us up and down the with the motion of a ship in water, dynamics and rhythms working hand in hand to paint a scene of nautical musical motion. After the piano states the opening theme, it takes over as the captain of the ship's ostinato, letting the string stake center stage as they pass melodic argumentation back and forth. Leading into the *Appassionato*, the piano interrupts with increasingly frantic downward scales until the strings reach an intense climax, now punctuated by virtuosic upward flourishes in the piano. The *tempo rubato* is a quick interlude between the strings before the *Risoluto* has the piano take center stage once more to proclaim Tchaikovsky as a heroic savior, the four-note motif riddled throughout singing an ode to the older composer.

The return to the *Lento lugubre* is not so much a rehashing of the opening theme as a new variation on these four notes. It is remarkable what Rachmaninoff was able to accomplish with such a sparsity of melodic material. By riffing on these four notes, he builds an entire dialogue between cello and violin, the piano providing the unceasing watery ostinato below. In the second *Più vivo*, the piano is given a moment to proclaim its own variation on G-A-B-D, accompanied by the sparsest texture in the violin and then cello. Rachmaninoff

once again leads back to the same flourishes in the *Appassionato*, finally ending the *Trio* with a solemn funeral march. The piano's left hand keeps the march tempo in its lowest register, the ground rumbling beneath the wheels of the hearse. Above it, the violin and cello join together to sing ana elegy on the four-note motif until finally the dirge fades away into the distance as the funeral procession continues on to its final destination.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

The Moscow Conservatory, Source: Wikimedia Commons

Gayane Chebotaryan: *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Cello*

A Soviet-trained composer of Armenian origin, Gayane Chebotaryan (1918-1988) was renowned both for her musical output and her musicological analysis of contemporary Armenian composers, notably Aram Khachaturian. Chebotaryan was born in the southern Russian town of Rostov-on-Don, but she completed her education at the St. Petersburg Conservatory (the same place where Rachmaninoff was one of the school's lowest ranking students). In 1947, she accepted a teaching appointment at the Yerevan State Conservatory in Armenia, where she taught for the rest of her life, finally achieving the rank of professor in 1977, thirty years after her initial appointment. Two years before joining the Armenian conservatory, she composed one of her most well-known works, the *Trio for Piano, Violin, and Cello* (1945). The *Trio* is performed as one continuous movement, with a few tempo changes marking smaller sections.

The *Trio* begins *Allegro con brio*, and the strings set up a playful eighth note ostinato split up between the cello and violin. The piano sits atop this base with a brilliant Armenian folk melody. The three then play a game of hot potato with this catchy theme until a heart wrenching countertheme takes over. A short cello solo connects to the *Andante drammatico* where drama reigns supreme. The violin then embraces an unapologetic Armenian rhapsody set over a sparse accompaniment in the cello and piano. Then we arrive at the *Più mosso*, where the cello accompanies the piano's increasingly frenetic energy until the return of the second theme. Through it all, Chebotaryan plays within the confines of Classical meter to portray in the same musical language the dances of her native Armenia.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Gayane Chebotaryan

Source: Armenian National Music

Astor Piazzolla: *Otoño Porteño*

Astor Piazzolla (1921-1992), the New Yorker of Argentine heritage who grew up learning bandonéon from Italian immigrants in Little Italy. Piazzolla was the master of the tango and the biggest proponent of "Nuevo Tango," a musical iteration of tango designed for the concert stage rather than the dance floor. Between 1965 and 1969, he worked on a series of compositions, each named after a different season in his beloved Buenos Aires. Thus were born the *Cuatro Estaciones Porteñas,* or the *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires*. Although not initially composed as a continuous suite, they worked well enough together thematically that Piazzolla himself condoned their performance as a matching set, though individual pieces were just as often performed independently. The last of these four compositions was the *Otoño Porteño*, or *Autumn in Buenos Aires*. Many have drawn comparisons between Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and those of Piazzolla, but Piazzolla's inspiration stretched much farther than just Vivaldi's precedent. The *Four Seasons of Buenos Aires* are always informed by tango rhythms, its sensuous syncopations, its passionate melodies, and frequent spotlighting of single instruments, as if they were dancers on the solo stage.

Otoño Porteño begins with a cello solo: a seductive and sultry melody composed around a winding motif. Its limited range only attenuates its attractive qualities. The cello solo is followed by a violin solo, this time accompanied by both other instruments. While the violin takes the same winding material as the cello, it instead transforms it into a tranquil dance in the sky as leaves flit through the air to land on our heads and all over the ground around us, ushering in the change of seasons and the end of long summer days.

-Saagar Asnani, UC Berkeley

Astor Piazzolla with his trusty bandonéon

Source: National Arts Center