

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)
Terzetto in C Major, Op. 74

Nineteenth century composers used the term “trio” for a conventional work for either violin, cello, and piano or violin, viola and cello; and the term “terzetto” for any other combination of three instruments. In January, 1887, Dvořák composed two terzettos for the unusual combination of two violins and viola. The first was performed publicly and published within a few months; the second was not performed publicly until 1938 and not published until 1948.

This unusual instrumentation and sequence of events calls for some explanation.

Both pieces were composed for three friends – a young student, who lived in the same building as Dvořák, his teacher and Dvořák himself – to play together in the evening. He designed the works to be simple and intimate, but apparently the first terzetto overtaxed the technical skills of the student. So within four days of completing the first, he completed the second, relaxing its demands and entitling it *Drobnosti* (“Miniatures”) to emphasize its informality and ease of performance.

But Dvořák had further second thoughts. His publisher Simrock in Berlin, he reasoned, could publish one piece with such an unusual instrumentation, but not two. So a week later he arranged the second terzetto, with a few minor changes, for violin and piano, under the title *Romantické kusy* (“Romantic Pieces”). Dvořák himself played the violin at the first public performance.

The composer then sent the first terzetto and the Romantic Pieces to Simrock, who published them with consecutive opus numbers – 74 and 75. A half-century later, the Prague Quartet revived the second terzetto under its title “Miniatures,” and the work was published in Prague as Op. 75a. It has since found its way into the repertory along with the other two pieces.

In keeping with the first terzetto’s informality, Dvořák cast the first movement in simple ABA form rather than in the more complex sonata form with an elaborate development. The first section is based on a quietly lyrical theme, one of Dvořák’s most attractive, while the second section is rhythmically energetic. After the return of the first section, the movement ends with a change-of-key passage leading directly into the second movement.

The second movement, a *larghetto* in 6/8 time, is also in three contrasting sections. The first, marked *molto espressivo*, is another flowing melody, richly harmonized, with a contrasting more rhythmic phrase. The second, more animated and accented, is canonic in structure – that is, with overlapping entrances.

The third movement, although entitled “Scherzo,” is in the rhythm of the *furiant*, a Czech folk dance often used by Dvořák to replace the scherzo’s conventional firm triple rhythm. In the *furiant*, rhythmic excitement is created by holding some of the third-beat notes into the succeeding measure, merging duple and triple rhythms. The effect is enriched here by the heavy use of double-stops (3rds, 5ths and octaves) and the coloring of pizzicatos and bowing *sul ponticello* (on the bridge). The contrasting middle section is an easy-going country dance, also seasoned with double-stops.

The fourth movement is a theme with series of brief variations. The theme itself is in a rather slow tempo, and has a grave, almost archaic, quality. The ensuing variations are enlivened by alternating slow and quick tempos and changing moods and shifting tonality. The concluding variation, *molto allegro*, winds things up in exciting fashion.

Alexander Borodin (1833-1887) String
Quartet No. 2 in D Major

Alexander Borodin belonged to a small but influential group of 19th century Russian composers who dedicated themselves to composing music of distinctively Russian character. Known as “The Five,” the group also included Mili Balakirev, Cesar Cui, Modest Mussorgsky and Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Only Balakirev started life as a professional musician; for the others, music was initially an avocation: Borodin was a chemist; Cui, a military officer and fortifications engineer; Mussorgsky, a guards officer then government clerk; and Rimsky-Korsakov, a naval officer.

Borodin had, in fact, a distinguished career in biochemistry, becoming a full professor at the Academy of Medicine in St. Petersburg. He achieved scientific prominence for his research on aldehydes, organic compounds that yield acids when oxidized and alcohols when reduced. He also took the lead in opening the doors of the

Academy of Medicine to women and to the economically disadvantaged. His monument in Russia cites his scientific achievements on one side and his musical achievements on the other.

Borodin was an accomplished cellist and enjoyed playing chamber music with friends. Given the demands of his academic and scientific work, however, his output as a composer was small. In his own words, he was "a Sunday composer." "I can hope for nothing better than to fall ill," he joked in a letter. "In fact, when I am tied to the house with some indisposition, unable to devote myself to my regular work, when my head is splitting, my eyes running, and I have to blow my nose every minute, then I give myself up to composing."

Thus, he left us only two string quartets and two symphonies, but the second in each of these forms are among the most popular works in Russian music. In the case of the quartet, the third movement, *Notturmo*, is often heard as a separate piece in arrangements for other instruments. In more recent years, the themes from the second and third movements have achieved independent fame as songs in the Broadway musical *Kismet*.

Borodin dedicated the second quartet, written in 1880, to his wife, Ekaterina, and intended it to mark the 20th anniversary of their first meeting in Heidelberg, Germany. Borodin had gone to Heidelberg as a graduate student to continue his scientific studies, and Ekaterina was there for treatment of tuberculosis. Ekaterina was a brilliant pianist and admirer of Chopin, Liszt and Schumann; she and Borodin often played together, and she had a strong influence on his musical tastes.

The quartet is marked more by the generous use and imaginative treatment of melody rather than by any deep emotion. Its themes have a Russian flavor, and are typically presented over an accompaniment of broken chords or intimate arabesques. The resulting texture has been likened to Chopin's piano style.

To present his melodies, Borodin often favors his own instrument, the cello. Thus, in the first movement, the flowing main theme is stated initially by the cello, and is continued by the first violin. The lyrical second theme is then given to the first violin, over a pizzicato accompaniment. The tempo picks up a bit for a third theme played by the viola.

The second movement is a scherzo, but with a development section instead of the conventional contrasting trio. There are two themes – a strain in dancing 8th notes and a lilting waltz, and these two elements are effectively blended. The second theme, Borodin is reported to have said, "was intended to conjure up an impression of a light-hearted evening spent in one of the suburban pleasure gardens of Saint Petersburg."

The cello opens the *Notturmo* with the sensuous melody spoiled by the *Kismet* lyricist with the words "And This Is My Beloved." If we can forget that dreadful lyric for a moment, we can enjoy the composer's inventive treatment of the tune – for example, its return as a canon (i.e., with overlapping phrases) between the first violin and cello.

The finale opens with a short *andante* introduction in which the theme is presented in two terse phrases. The tempo picks up, and the theme is then treated contrapuntally. The first violin gives us a more lyrical second theme, and during the course of the movement the *andante* returns twice. The quartet then ends in a burst of excitement.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) String Quartet in E Minor, Op. 44, No. 2

Mendelssohn lived only 38 years, but within that abbreviated life span he was undoubtedly the

happiest, most comfortable, and least troubled of all the leading composers of the 19th century. The son of a wealthy banker, he never had an economic worry. By his early 20s, he was internationally known as a composer, conductor and pianist. He was adored by his family and friends, and his marriage to Cécile Jeanrenaud was unusually contented for an artist with so hectic a travel and work schedule. Small wonder that, granted his gift for melody and mastery of form, his music was characterized more by a sense of well-being than

any intense emotion.

This is particularly true of the three quartets of Opus 44, which Mendelssohn wrote in 1837-38, perhaps the sunniest period of his sunny life. In addition to conducting and performing engagements in Germany, France and Britain, he had become conductor of the Gewandhaus orchestra in Leipzig and was building that body into the finest in Europe. Moreover, 1837 was the year of his marriage, and in February, 1838, Karl, the first of his five children, was born.

Although this quartet was the second of the three to be published, it was the first in order of composition – being written, in fact, on the Mendelssohns' honeymoon in Freiburg and the Black Forest. As the quartet demonstrates, Mendelssohn, now in his late 20s, was in full command of skills as a composer, particularly in his facile use of counterpoint and rich fugal passages learned from his study of Johann Sebastian Bach.

The first movement may remind listeners of Mendelssohn's great Violin Concerto, on which he started working the following year. Both works are in E minor, and both begin with the violin playing a passionately emotional melody against a restless syncopated rhythm, set in the quartet's case by the second violin and viola. The second theme is simpler, more like a folk song, again presented by the first violin but with the cello continuing in its higher register.

The second movement is the scherzo, and is one of the best examples of Mendelssohn's frequent ventures into musical fairyland. The character of the main theme is set by the use of four 16th notes on the same tone followed by a string of 8th notes going downhill.

Over his lifetime Mendelssohn composed 48 informal piano pieces under the title "Songs Without Words". The pieces were intended for performance in the family living room and were generally devoted to one specific mood often bordering on the sentimental. Occasionally, he used the style, without the title, for a slow movement in chamber music. Here the first violin presents the melody

while the second violin offers a rocking 16th note accompaniment, which is then passed on to the other instruments.

The agitated fourth movement is primarily a peasant-like dance. A contrasting lyrical melody is introduced, and eventually the two elements are combined contrapuntally, one superimposed on the other.

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