

The Red Bank
Chamber Music Society
presents

Trio Solisti
Beethoven • Brahms • Arensky

María Bachmann, violin
Alexis Pia Gerlach, cello
Andrius Žlabys, piano

Sunday Afternoon
May 1, 2016 • 4:30 PM
Trinity Church Auditorium
Red Bank, NJ

PROGRAM NOTES

PROGRAM

Piano Trio in C Minor, Op. 1, No. 3

Ludwig van Beethoven

1. Allegro con brío
2. Andante cantabile con variazioni
3. Menuetto: Quasi allegro
4. Finale: Prestissimo

Piano Trio No. 2 in C Major, Op. 87

Johannes Brahms

1. Allegro moderato
2. Andante con moto
3. Scherzo: Presto
4. Finale: Allegro giocoso

INTERMISSION

Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 32

Anton Arensky

1. Allegro moderato
2. Scherzo
3. Elegia
4. Finale: Allegro non troppo

Notes on the Program

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827) **Piano Trio Op.1 No. 3 in C Minor (1795)**

(~21 minutes)

Beethoven was among the most versatile of composers, with works ranging from delicate salon pieces to thunderous concert-hall symphonic/choral works. But, like so many composers in their most personal expression, he always returned to the musical purity of small-ensemble instrumental chamber music, with just a few like-minded music-lovers distilling a symphonic soundscape to its essence.

In 1795 the 25-year-old Beethoven signed a contract with Artaria, the leading Viennese music publisher whose client roster included Mozart, Haydn, and Boccherini. At that time he was already a celebrated virtuoso pianist, perhaps the greatest of his day after the death of Mozart in 1791. He had studied briefly with Joseph Haydn, though he famously denied that he had learned anything of value from him. While he had been composing since his earliest teenage years, and many of his early works had already been published privately from the age of twelve, his contract with Artaria marked his definitive arrival on the Viennese music scene. Their first publication was a set of three piano trios which they designated “Opus 1”. Public and private performances of the works in advance of its release, along with Artaria’s broad client base of sponsors and amateur players, guaranteed strong sales of Beethoven’s first commercial publication.

The first movement *Allegro con brio* starts off in classical sonata form with two sharply contrasting themes, but Beethoven then expands the development section and merges it with the recapitulation and coda into an organic unity with no audible seams. The second movement *Andante cantabile con variazioni* offers five variations on an original song-like theme; the co-equal role given to the cello in the ensemble stands in marked contrast to Haydn’s earlier use of the instrument largely as support for the piano’s left-hand bass line.

The third movement is titled *Menuetto: Quasi Allegro* but in form and character it bears all the hallmarks of a light-hearted Beethoven scherzo, with dissonances highlighted and off-beat accents stressed; a middle trio section gives the cello a chance to lead the melody against an elfin piano line. The fourth movement *Finale: Prestissimo* returns to C minor with a restless energy that is only slightly moderated by its second subject, a stately anthem in C major.



Johannes Brahms (1833 – 1897) **Piano Trio No.2 in C Major, Op.87 (1882)**

(~26 minutes)

If our most common word-image of Beethoven is “Revolutionary”, surely the one for Brahms is “Perfectionist”, a man who destroyed much of his music because he thought it wasn’t good enough. Paintings and busts of Beethoven invariably show him with scowling face, ferociously intense gaze, and wildly flowing hair. In contrast, Brahms typically appears grandfatherly and somewhat unkempt, bearded, and smoking a cigar or walking a little dog. And yet, for all the careful crafting and echoes of classical structure in Brahms’s music, it is every bit as passionate as Beethoven’s most fervent creations.

Brahms wrote three trios for violin, cello, and piano, and today we hear the second of them, which he published in 1882 at the age of 49. Nearly thirty years earlier in 1854 he had written a piano trio in B major, but he was so dissatisfied with it that he completely revised it and published it in 1891 at the age of 58; nonetheless that later B major trio is still titled “No.1”. Considering this history, we may rightly regard today’s “Piano Trio No.2” as Brahms’s first mature work in the piano trio form.

There are four movements in the trio, with changes of key signature that reinforce the harmonic unity of the work, and changes of mood and tempo that sustain interest. The work bears the stamp of Brahms throughout in its rich harmony, dense chordal structure, wide range of dynamics and tempo, and much ambiguity of “pulse” created by placing accents off the downbeat and by writing three-beat melodies inside of four-beat measures.

The first movement, in C major, is marked *Allegro* (moderately fast) in three-quarter time and opens with the violin and cello introducing a short four-bar motif in unison, played forcefully *poco forte* (a “bit” loud, a somewhat ambiguous term favored by Brahms). The piano joins in and supports them in that first theme as it continues to be elaborated, and he will continue to do so throughout, but he will not have a single opportunity to play it himself until the very last four bars of the movement. While several related thematic fragments are introduced to complement the opening theme, the real second theme appears a minute later, introduced by the piano, and is a sweetly lyrical (marked *dolce*) melody in G major. Both themes are developed continuously, with changes in tempo, key, and dynamics. The movement ends with a coda, concluding with the four-bar phrase that opened it, played now by all three players for the first time.

The second movement, in A minor, is marked *Andante con moto*, slowly but with forward motion, and is built in the classic form of a theme and variations. There are really two themes, or thematic fragments, introduced at the outset: one, with a Hungarian gypsy flavor, starts on the downbeat and is presented by the violin and cello; the other joins on the off-beat and is played by the piano. The five variations that follow alternately highlight one or the other theme in the foreground.

The third movement scherzo opens very quietly (*pianissimo*) and delicately (*leggiero*) in C minor, at a fast tempo (*presto*) that demands the utmost virtuosity and ensemble coordination. The combination of minor key, high velocity, extreme dynamics, and jittery metrical effects creates a mood of suspense that pervades the outer sections of this movement. In contrast, the middle “trio” section of the movement is a sweetly lyrical waltz in C major, somewhat slower than the outer sections but still moving quickly forward. As it builds in volume, Brahms adds further excitement through syncopation and metrical ambiguity. After the trio, the opening scherzo section is repeated almost verbatim, and the movement ends in C major on a ghostly plucked *pizzicato*.

The fourth movement Finale returns to the key of C major and is marked *allegro giocoso*, quick and playful. The first theme is introduced by the violin and cello in unison while the piano plays a quick staccato accompaniment that will itself later become part of the thematic development. It all begins quietly and *mezza voce* (in a soft, subdued tone) but soon builds to *fortissimo*. The piano introduces the second theme all by himself, and the strings soon join in. After much thematic and harmonic development, the movement ends the trio in an exciting coda.



Anton Arensky (1861 – 1906)
Piano Trio No.1 in D Minor, Op.32 (1894)

(~30 minutes)

Anton Stepanovich Arensky was born about 100 miles from Saint Petersburg, and he received his early musical training from his parents, both avid amateurs. At the age of eighteen he entered the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, where he studied with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), who had been teaching composition and orchestration there since 1871. Upon graduation three years later he was immediately hired by the Moscow Conservatory, becoming at age 21 one of the youngest professors ever invited to that prestigious academy, and he remained on the faculty until 1895; among his famous students were Scriabin and Rachmaninoff. He returned to St. Petersburg to direct the Imperial Choir for the next six years. In the final five years of his life he composed, conducted, and performed at the piano.

Russian music in the last quarter of the nineteenth century had two main currents: one was the nationalistic style of Rimsky-Korsakov and his circle, who made liberal use of Russian folk music and traditions in their writing; the other was the more cosmopolitan style exemplified by Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), who tended more to the European mainstream with Mozart as his ideal. Arensky's early works show the folk-inflected influence of his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov, but his later works, including the piano trio we hear today, are more in the international style of Tchaikovsky. While quite popular in his day, Arensky's music was largely neglected for a hundred years after his death, though his chamber works have experienced a revival of interest and appreciation.

His first piano trio is probably his best-known composition. It is dedicated to the memory of Karl Davydov, a famous Russian cellist and director of the Saint Petersburg Conservatory during Arensky's student years who had died five years earlier. All four movements prominently feature the cello; in fact, many sections of the piece may sound like cello/piano duets, while long passages where the cello is absent suggest Davydov's ghostly presence. It is structured as an organic whole on a large scale, with themes and motifs reappearing and being developed across different movements to unify the work, not just appearing and evolving within individual movements.

The opening movement is by turns passionate, lyrical, and playful, sustaining a high level of energy through its extended sonata form. The second movement *Scherzo* is a scintillating joy-ride for the pianist and a delight for the audience, with a thumping country dance in the middle of it. The third movement *Elegia* – a eulogy to Davidoff – opens with the muted strings playing a mournful melody while the piano plays a funeral-march figure; this alternates with contrasting major-key sections in a wistful mood of nostalgia. The finale opens and closes with forceful drama, passing through several changes of mood and energy as it develops the themes of the movement, while also quoting and developing themes from the first three movements in a way that binds the entire work together.

©Lawrence Bein

ARTISTS

Trio Solisti has forged a reputation as “the most exciting piano trio in America” (*The New Yorker*) with a passionate performance style that combines exceptional virtuosity and penetrating musical insight. Possessing a repertoire that encompasses the standard repertoire and works by contemporary composers, rave reviews follow the trio throughout its concert tours. Noted *Wall Street Journal* critic Terry Teachout proclaimed, “To my mind, Trio Solisti has now succeeded the Beaux Arts Trio as the outstanding chamber music ensemble of its kind.” Described by *The New York Times* as “consistently brilliant,” the group has been praised by *The Washington Post* for its “unrelenting passion and zealous abandon.”

Alongside its ongoing touring activities, Trio Solisti is embarking upon a number of exciting new ventures. In Fall 2015, the ensemble plans to unveil a three-concert series at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall, presenting the complete piano chamber music of Brahms. Special guest performers include violinist Jesse Mills, violists Richard O’Neill and Hsin-Yun Huang, clarinetist Anthony McGill, and French hornist Julie Landsman. The trio will also dedicate itself to recording two magnum opuses: the complete Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff piano trios, and the complete Brahms piano trios, scheduled for release on Aeolian Classics in Fall 2015 and 2016, respectively. In addition, Trio Solisti is working with Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon to commission a piano trio to be premiered in 2017.

Critical acclaim was recently accorded the ensemble for its 2014 recording of the Ravel and Chausson piano trios, on Bridge Records. *The New York Times* raved, “startlingly fresh and fascinating...plenty of fire and excitement in this standout recording.” *Gramophone* magazine described it as “a performance of kaleidoscopic hues, beauty of sound, and bountiful panache. Whether silken or sweeping, the music receives idiomatic and sophisticated treatment as shaped by these keenly perceptive artists.”

Founded in 2001, Trio Solisti – has performed at prestigious concert venues such as the Great Performers at Lincoln Center, Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, People’s Symphony Concerts at Town Hall, Washington Performing Arts Society at Kennedy Center, Seattle’s Meany Hall and La Jolla’s Reville Series. The ensemble has a varied discography on a number of record labels, including Naxos, Bridge Records, Endeavour Classics, and Marquis Classics. It actively champions contemporary music, collaborating with leading composers such as Philip Glass, Lowell Liebermann, Paul Moravec, and Kevin Puts.

Trio Solisti proudly marks its 11th year as Ensemble-in-Residence at Adelphi University in Garden City, New York, and it is pleased to celebrate the 13th season of Telluride MusicFest, an annual chamber music festival founded by the ensemble.

You are invited to visit their website at www.triosolisti.com