



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)
Piano Trio in B-flat major “Archduke”

It is not quite like the Sistine Chapel where God, having created the world, reaches out and with the mere touch of his finger brings Adam to life. But almost. The *sonata a tre*, a modest child of the baroque, emerged in the late 18th century as the mighty piano trio and Beethoven was the godly, anointing finger. In its “original form” the violin or flute summoned the keyboard and cello to kneel down and serve as a platform for their treble virtuosity. When the *sonata a tre* edged its way into the attention of Mozart and Haydn, both did their part in promoting a little more democracy within the group, though hauling the forte piano into prominence. The keyboard builders did their part too, giving the forte piano more muscle than the poor plucked harpsichord ever dreamed of having. When Beethoven began his series of eleven piano trios (all still sounding out from concert stages the world around), the piano trio was soon seriously muscling aside the string quartet to claim a leading role in 19th-century chamber music.

At the turn of that century, the rising middle class were taking the world of chamber music away from the idle princes with their candle-lit palaces and smiling mistresses and bringing it into the new open world of public concerts. To satisfy this growing body of amateur musicians in Vienna, Beethoven even transcribed his own symphonies to be played as piano trios, more likely in a parlor than a palace. A bit of an irony then that his last great piano trio should carry a noble name. But the Archduke Rudolph (1788–1831) was no idle prince, even though he was the youngest brother of the emperor. He was a serious student, a pianist and composer of some talent, and most importantly: a true friend and devoted supporter of his stormy-tempered teacher. Beethoven repaid his unflinching kindness with numerous heart-felt dedications, including the *Les Adieux* sonata, the *Emperor Concerto*, the *Missa Solemnis*, and this great trio.

The *Archduke* premiered at a charity concert for the military in a hotel ballroom on April 11, 1811 with Beethoven at the piano. The ubiquitous memoirist Ludwig Spohr reported: “It was not a treat. The piano was badly out of tune, which Beethoven minded little, since he could not hear it...the poor deaf man pounded on the keys till the strings jangled...I was deeply saddened at so hard a fate. If it is a great misfortune for anyone to be deaf, how shall a musician endure it without giving way to despair?” In fact, after the *Archduke* Beethoven never played in public again.

The trio however survived this mistreatment to become the cherished icon it is today. From the very opening notes a leisurely-paced grandeur is evident, drawing the listener into a world of expansive humanity and emotion. Modern ears hear now an affinity to the Romanticism of

Brahms (not even born for another twenty years) and the theme repetitions have a mantra-like quality liberated from the familiar classical dictates of form. The unhurried, noble, spacious, even symphonic, nature of this movement, savouring its excellence, must have been in those days both unsettling and reassuring. One is immediately in the presence of something great. The Scherzo theme skips in on unaccompanied cello, is snatched up by the violin, and then passed around for several light-hearted variations until a trio waltz introduces a new tension of dark against light. Finally the cheerful original theme reasserts itself, more robust and mature.

The lofty third movement, *Andante cantabile*, unfolds a hymn-like theme through elaborate variations, each with subtly rhythmic imagination but always maintaining a prolonged serene character. This emotional meditation is finally impudently interrupted, mid-cadence, by a lively dance theme and without pause the fourth movement is off and running. This abrupt trick Beethoven evidently relished when he improvised for friends. A contemporary observer reports: "It was Beethoven's habit, after catching everyone up in the magic of his music, to slam his fist down on the keys and burst into raucous laughter, as though embarrassed by the spiritual experience they had just shared." The last movement is more like a witty teasing piano concerto, dancing for its own pleasure with whirling exuberance, as if the emotional weight of the first three movement needed some dispelling relief.

A reminder of the trio's tumultuous historical context: when Beethoven wrote the *Archduke*, his recently created *Eroica* and *Fidelio*, plus the hammering of the Fifth Symphony, were resonating in his head, and the sounds and terror of the Napoleonic armies marching through the streets of Vienna in 1805 still fresh and terrible. The high ideals of the French Revolution were simmering there, too. Years later in 1819 in a letter to the Archduke Rudolph, still his friend, Beethoven wrote: "In the world of art, as in the whole of creation, freedom and progress are our main goals." No doubt this aspiration stamped the creation of the *Archduke*. The innately rich human and emotional qualities which would later flower in the Romantic movement still speak to us 200 years later through Beethoven's prescient mature voice.