

# Wethersfield Chamber Concerts

## Rhodes Piano Trio

18 November 2012 at 4pm

### PROGRAMME NOTES *by John Woollard*

#### BEETHOVEN (1770 – 1827) – Piano Trio No. 3 in C minor, Op. 1 No. 3

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

Beethoven as a pianist and enthusiastic writer of chamber music needed to find a medium in which he could write works which he would be able to perform. During his early years he experimented with various combinations of instruments, aiming to find a group which balanced the sounds of the instruments in such a way that no one instrument dominated. In 1785 he wrote an early set of piano quartets, which included a viola player, but he rejected that as a medium as he was not satisfied with the balance. The three String Trios Op. 1 were by no means his first works, nor even his first published works. They were dedicated to Karl Alois, Prince Lichnowsky, a patron who financed Beethoven extensively, allowing him to pursue the unusual path of a freelance musician at a time when so many composers and players served in the households of the rich and powerful.

The choice of piano trio was safe and practical. Safe, because the piano trio was considered a generally lighter genre with a less daunting history than the string quartet. Practical, because Beethoven himself was a brilliant

pianist in need of performance material favoring his participation and leadership. Haydn had written a large number of wonderful piano trios that were essentially piano sonatas with string reinforcements. Mozart had written a handful, at least two of them masterworks worthy for three independent players. But both composers wrote trios with three or fewer movements, never exceeding around twenty minutes in length and hardly ever reaching the depths of their other chamber works. With his three new piano trios, Beethoven raised the stakes by adding a fourth movement, extending the length, deepening the emotional expression, giving almost equal roles to each of the players and gathering a great diversity of character and mood within a single set.

The works received their first performance in 1795 in Lichnowsky's Vienna palace, and amongst the guests was Haydn himself, who is said to have told Beethoven, "You give me the impression of a man with more than one head, more than one heart and more than one soul!" Whilst Haydn greatly approved of the first two Trios he advised Beethoven to withhold publication of the Third Trio, suggesting that it was perhaps too serious too soon; the public would neither understand nor approve. This rankled Beethoven and contributed to a rather cool relationship between the two composers.

#### SCHUMANN (1810 – 1856) - Piano Trio No. 3 in G minor, Op. 110

1. Bewegt, doch nicht zu rasch  
(animated, but not too quickly)
2. Ziemlich langsam (largo)
3. Rasch (quickly)
4. Kräftig, mit Humor (strongly, with humour)

Robert Schumann had a life long history of medical problems which influenced his life and music in many ways. Throughout his life he had episodic periods of depression which significantly reduced his compositional output. At the age of 34 he had a complete nervous breakdown and refused to listen to any of his music. Ten years later in 1854 he tried to take his own life by jumping in the Rhine. He was admitted into an asylum and died there two years later. Schumann created two contrasting personas – Florestan (spontaneous) and Eusebius (introverted) and these characters repeatedly occur in his compositions. This combined with obsessive repeated rhythms, fleeting phrases, abrupt transitions and radical use of harmony, it has been argued constitutes a musical mind beset with Bipolar disorder, but he was still capable of writing some of the finest and original music of the romantic period.

From 1850 to 1854, Schumann composed in a wide variety of genres. Critics have disputed the quality of his work at this time; a widely held view has been that his music showed signs of mental breakdown and creative decay. More recently, critics have suggested that the

changes in style may be explained by "lucid experimentation".

Composed in 1851, the last of three works that Schumann wrote for this combination of instruments, the Trio is separated in time from the two earlier trios by a period of serious mental instability for the composer. He had taken the post of conductor of the prestigious Städtische Musikverein zu Düsseldorf, a position for which he was entirely unsuited according even to his friends. He neglected his duties, often to enable him to find the time to compose, and his behaviour on the podium quickly aroused the hostility of musicians and audience.

'Robert is working busily on a Trio for piano, violin and cello', Clara Schumann confided to her diary on 11 October 1851, 'but he won't let me hear any of it at all until he is completely finished. I only know that it is in G minor'. The first rehearsal of the new work, a fortnight or so later, made a deep impression on Clara. 'It is original', she wrote, 'and increasingly passionate, especially the scherzo, which carries one along with it into the wildest depths'.

Clara Schumann was able to play both the Trio and the D minor Violin Sonata during a chamber music evening at their house, on 15 November. The string players on that occasion were Schumann's violinist friend Joseph von Wasielewski, and the principal cellist of the Düsseldorf orchestra, Christian Reimers.

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Schumann's last piano trio is a piece that has all but disappeared from the repertoire. Together with some of his other late chamber works, it has sometimes been cited as evidence of the composer's weakening creative strength—a judgement with which any listener carried away by the surging passion of its opening Allegro, the

warmth of its slow movement or the sweeping continuity of its scherzo may find it hard to concur. If the finale strikes us as rather more episodic, it nevertheless draws the threads of the work together with remarkable subtlety.

----- Interval -----

## MENDELSSOHN (1809 – 1847) – Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49

1. Molto allegro agitato
2. Andante con moto tranquillo
3. Scherzo. Leggiero e vivace
4. Finale. Allegro assai appassionato

It has been suggested that the reason so many composers wrote so few trios is that three is a crowd and difficult to maintain in true harmony. Yet it remains a fact that some of the greatest musical experiences come from trios, such as Beethoven's Archduke, Dvorák's Dumky and Brahms' great Horn Trio. Haydn's vast output of quality music includes 125 baryton trios and thirty-one piano trios, while Mozart left only seven piano trios, one more than Beethoven. It is perhaps significant that writing for three instruments invariably brings out the best in a composer, and equally so that Mendelssohn's two piano trios belong to the last years of his short yet highly productive life. A life which, seen in retrospect, covered an enormous musical spectrum and finally burnt out in an excess of energy.

Haydn died less than four months after Mendelssohn was born, and the following year saw the births of both Chopin and Schumann, with Liszt only a year later. When Mendelssohn was born, Beethoven had eighteen more productive years to live, Berlioz was a boy of six, Rossini was flexing his creative muscles at seventeen, Schubert was twelve, and only four years later both Verdi and Wagner were to arrive in the world. Mendelssohn, uniquely among his contemporaries, was born into a wealthy, cultured Berlin household, where artists were constant visitors and the youngsters of the family were encouraged to develop their own creative instincts.

Small wonder that young Felix became a master musical craftsman before reaching his teens. Much of the credit for this belongs to the Sunday musical gatherings in the Mendelssohn home, when first rate amateur as well as visiting professional players would get together to

perform music, including the works of the boy of the house. No budding composer could have asked for a better training ground in which to develop his gifts. Much of that early music survived, and some of it was even approved by the composer for publication in later years, but an early trio of that time appears to have been destroyed. He was not to attempt another piano trio for more than twenty years.

Twenty years in which he established a considerable reputation as a highly practical and equally cultured artist, whose friends ranged from Weber and Goethe to Cherubini, Rossini, Paganini, Chopin, Liszt and Schumann, who sent Mendelssohn the newly discovered score of Schubert's Great Symphony in 1838. Mendelssohn's musicianship knew no bounds, and he was famous for conducting the first 'modern' performance of Bach's St Matthew Passion in 1829, a month after his own twentieth birthday. He was also associated as conductor with the great Gewandhaus Orchestra in Leipzig, while his regular visits to England had brought his own music to the forefront of English programmes, enhanced by his friendship with Queen Victoria

The trio was completed on 23 September 1839 and published the following year. The trio is one of Mendelssohn's most popular chamber works and is recognized as one of his greatest along with his Octet, Op. 20. During the initial composition of the work, Mendelssohn took the advice of a fellow composer, Ferdinand Hiller, and revised the piano part. The revised version was in a more romantic, Schumannesque style with the piano given a more important role in the trio. Indeed, the revised piece was reviewed by Schumann who declared Mendelssohn to be "the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most illuminating of musicians.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Violin: Michael Gurevich  
Cello: David Edmonds  
Piano: Robert Thompson

In 2011 the Rhodes Piano Trio won 2nd Prize at the Melbourne International Chamber Music Competition. Selected for representation by YCAT in 2010, over the last year the Trio has given recitals at Purcell Room, Bridgewater Hall, the Chester, Lake District Summer Music, Edinburgh Fringe and Festspiele Mecklenburg Vorpommern Festivals. Earlier this year the Trio took part in masterclasses with Menahem Pressler, Mitsuko Uchida in Aldeburgh and with Ferenc Rados and Andras Keller at IMS Prussia Cove. Engagements this season include debut recitals at Wigmore Hall, Barbican and Schwetzingen Festspiele.

All three members of the Rhodes Piano Trio enjoy great success individually, Robert Thompson completing his solo studies with Peter Frankl at Yale University, David Edmonds with Gregor Horsch in Dusseldorf and Michael Gurevich as a Junior Fellow at the RNCM and member of the London Haydn Quartet.

**Our next concert is Kathryn Rudge, Soprano, on 7 April 2013 at 3:30pm.**

For more information on the artists and on future concerts, please visit [www.wethersfieldchamberconcerts.org.uk](http://www.wethersfieldchamberconcerts.org.uk)