

Brahms

The Piano Trios

Emanuel Ax
Leonidas Kavakos
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Johannes Brahms

(1833 1897)

Disc One

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

1. Allegro 9:51
2. Andante con moto 8:04
3. Scherzo: Presto 4:48
4. Finale: Allegro giocoso 6:11

Disc Two

Piano Trio No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 101

1. Allegro energico 7:28
2. Presto non assai 3:52
3. Andante grazioso 4:06
4. Allegro molto 5:39

Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major, Op. 8

5. Allegro con brio 14:34
6. Scherzo: Allegro molto 6:31
7. Adagio 8:30
8. Finale: Allegro 6:46

Emanuel Ax, piano
Leonidas Kavakos, violin
Yo-Yo Ma, cello

A Note on the Repertoire by Emanuel Ax

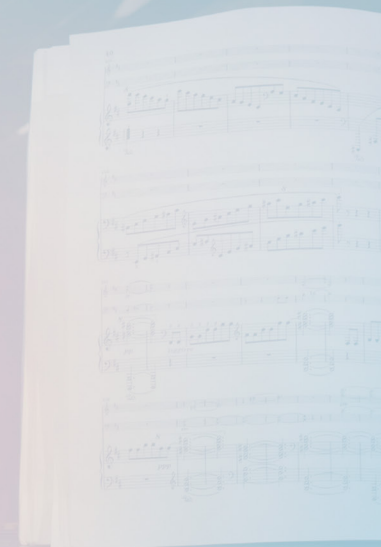
Johannes Brahms was notoriously self-critical. He burned the manuscripts of many works he completed early in his career as a composer because he found them unworthy of the high standards he had set for himself. Perhaps because he maintained these high expectations, the judgment of musical history speaks for itself: one has to search far and wide to find concert programs that do not regularly feature the music of Brahms.

"You have not yet had such a beautiful trio from me and very likely have not published its equal in the last ten years." These words from Brahms to his publishers, Simrock, are totally atypical of the composer. Normally diffident about his work, he must have been especially proud of the Trio No. 2 in C Major, Op. 87 – quite rightly, too. The first movement wonderfully combines stateliness and passion. The second is an inspired set of variations on an original theme with a Hungarian flavor. This theme and the five variations that follow take us into a world of sadness and regret that emerges often in Brahms's late piano works and the Clarinet Trio. The Scherzo follows, with its eerie harmonies interrupted by a glorious melody in the middle. The trio finishes with

a last movement that is cheery and playful – anyone who has watched *The Simpsons* will recognize the opening tune!

The Trio No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 101, was published in April of 1887, at the same time as the Cello Sonata in F Major and the Violin Sonata in A. Perhaps Brahms had in mind a program of these three works? Both Clara Schumann and Elisabeth von Herzogenberg, a lifelong friend and excellent amateur pianist, complained about the difficulty of the piano writing (although I would complain about all the trios!). Still, Clara wrote in her diary, "No other work of Johannes has so entirely transported me; so tender is the flow of the second movement, which is wonderfully poetic. I am happier tonight than I have been for a long time."

Brahms had his own performance recommendation for the Third Trio: "I should think that the trio's finale requires first very careful handling, then the reverse!" (This could be a terrific prescription for performing all music.) The first movement is dramatic, terse and uncompromising in its mood. The last is also dramatic, but brilliant and triumphant at the end. It is the middle movements of the C Major Trio that enchant – the wistful and fleeting second, which Clara Schumann mentions, and the lilting third, with its alternating bars of three beats and four that produce a rocking, almost lullaby quality.



Brahms's first piano trio, in B Major, is commonly known as Op. 8. It exists in two versions, one from 1854 or even earlier, and the second from thirty-five years later. Simrock wanted to have all the works of Brahms under its imprint, so the composer was offered the possibility of making changes to the earlier work, which had been published by Breitkopf and Hartel.

"I have rewritten my B Major Trio and can call it Op. 108 instead of Op. 8," Brahms wrote to Clara, adding with typical modesty, "It will not be so wild as it was before – but whether it will be better?"

In fact, the revision creates virtually a new piece. The glorious melody that originally began the B Major Trio is left untouched, though the violin that accompanies in the first version is absent and does not enter until it plays the main theme as well. From that point, the movement is completely revised, shorter and more unified, with an especially felicitous new second theme and coda. The Scherzo is left mostly as it was, and the theme of the slow movement is retained. It seems to me that Brahms relied on the deeply inspired ideas of Op. 8 to make the entire experience of the work much more satisfying and logical in Op. 108. He wrote to his friend Julius Grimm about the process that he "did not provide it with a wig, but just combed and arranged its hair a little." Any comparison with the earlier version will show how humorous and deprecatory Brahms was

being, in introducing his transformed version of Op. 8 that has become the standard for this work. In effect, Op. 8 is Brahms's last trio.

My love affair with the music of Brahms started five decades ago: a recording of the B-flat Major Piano Concerto by Arthur Rubinstein. At a time when we listened to music on vinyl, I wore out two copies of this LP. Very soon, however, both of Brahms's piano trios became just as important as his solo works in my listening and performing life. To be able to work on these masterpieces again with my friends Leonidas and Yo-Yo is a great privilege. The piano trios have been a part of the musical canon for many years, played and recorded magnificently countless times. The glory of such musical masterpieces is that no one performance can exhaust everything in them. It is because of the infinite depth and variety of Brahms's genius that we hope to be part of the long tradition of this wonderful music.

Produced by Steven Epstein
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“Longing” forms part of a series of photographs exploring the kinetic patterns traced by shooting moving fiber optics with a long exposure and are created entirely in-camera. Although the lights themselves are purely moving points in space, the rhythmic motion of the light sources produce patterns and forms reminiscent of 3-dimensional objects, their sketched lines interweaving to suggest an informal harmony.

Emanuel Ax is grateful to Steinway for the wonderful piano.
Mr. Ax is a Steinway artist.
Leonidas Kavakos plays a 1734 Stradivarius violin – “The Willemotte.”
Yo-Yo Ma plays a 1712 Stradivarius cello – “The Davidoff.”

Thank you to Barbara Renner, piano tuner extraordinaire.
Thank you to our team of page turners – Kristie Chan, Jen Chen, Ana Dulskiy and Teresa Murphy.

Yo-Yo Ma dedicates this album to Jill, who loves Brahms as a soulmate; to Emily, for whom the B Major Piano Trio has special meaning; and to Ruth, whose dedication and commitment made recording these trios such a joyous moment.

Leonidas Kavakos appears courtesy of Decca Classics.

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