



L.V. Beethoven: Trio op. 11 in B-flat major

“Before I begin work, I must have something to eat.” This uninspired title, using Joseph Weigl’s presently famous aria from the opera *L’amor Marinaro* as the theme of the trio’s third movement, gained the entire piece its vast popularity under the commonly known name “Gassenhauer Trio” (“popular song”).

Beethoven, always determined to innovate and excel, published three piano trios as his Opus 1 cycle in 1795, hoping to draw wider attention to his music by focusing on the still-undeveloped medium of the piano trio. However, reactions were not all-positive: the great master of the time and Beethoven’s teacher, Joseph Haydn, declared his Op.1 Nr.3 Trio in C minor, dearest to Beethoven of all of his compositions so far, too extreme for the Viennese public. For the next thirteen years, Beethoven refrained from composing any major piano trio. The Opus 11 Trio, originally for piano, clarinet (or violin) and cello, is the one exception. In it, Beethoven responds to the critique of the older master: the extreme elements in Beethoven’s style are reined in, making only modest, subtle appearances; the general tone is pleasant and communicative.

However, even this restrained, relatively ‘harmless’ trio, was described by the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* as “... stellenweise eben nicht leicht, aber doch fließender als manche andere sachen vom verfasser...” (“at various points not easy, but still more flowing than other works from this author...”), and indeed, there are still abrupt moments in the piece: the sharp contrast in the first movement between the F major fortissimo close of the first theme and the pianissimo D major of the second theme; the first movement’s devious, “fake-wall” coda; or the third movement’s variation for piano solo with its confusion of displaced rhythms. The effect on the listeners at the premiere must have been one of equal parts shock and delight!

There is one last story that can be related regarding Beethoven and this Opus 11 Trio. Beethoven decided to perform this trio in a musical duel against the famous pianist and composer Daniel Steibelt – one can imagine it was an ideal platform from which he could display both his fresh compositional ideas and own capabilities as a pianist. His rival, however, was apparently not impressed with Beethoven's abilities: he challenged Beethoven head-on, improvising his own variations to Joseph Weigl's theme! Beethoven's reaction was furious: he took Steibelt's score, placed it upside down on the piano and hammered the music out on the keyboard with one finger. The result of this evening was a lifelong rivalry between the two men, not to mention immense embarrassment to the host of the evening, Count Moritz von Fries...

We, however, more than 200 years later, remove our gaze from Beethoven's bad manners and take great pleasure in hearing this trio that, despite all of Beethoven's attempts to appease the gatekeepers of tradition, still display all of his signature trademarks of humour, wit and great beauty.

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