



Ludwig van Beethoven: Trio Op. 97 in B-flat Major (Archduke)

The “Archduke” Trio: Beethoven’s famous piano trio, with its four expansive movements and symphonic dimensions of almost 45 minutes, has long been an established name. The title of this trio op. 97 in B-flat major, composed between 1810 and 1811, did not come from the composer. Instead, it is a reference to the piece’s dedicatee, the Archduke Rudolph.

Rudolph, the youngest son of Emperor Leopold II and grandson of the Empress Maria Theresia, was an important friend and patron of Beethoven. Beethoven’s last piano student, the Archduke revered the composer, who was 17 years his senior. In addition to 14 major works, Beethoven also dedicated the acclaimed *Missa solemnis* – which was written on the occasion of Rudolph’s enthronement – to him. It is interesting to note that almost all of these compositions share certain characteristics. In these pieces, Beethoven’s revolutionary side, nonconformism and striking humour are less prominent. Instead, we see Beethoven the humanist and visionary who believed in brotherhood and the goodness of mankind: values which are similarly reflected in his Ninth Symphony and in scenes from the opera *Fidelio*. In these pieces written for the Archduke, Beethoven’s deep devotion to a generous and noble individual, one that exceeds mere thankfulness for financial support, is unequivocal.

The first movement’s mood is peaceful and mild, marked by elysian harmony and a noble temperament. Even traditional tonal relationships inherent in the classical sonata form, which usually provide a certain degree of tension from the start, are softened by Beethoven: the secondary theme does not appear in the dominant key of F major, but rather in the mediant, G major. This secondary theme is heavily reminiscent of the principal theme of Beethoven’s Fourth Piano Concerto in G major; in the development, there are clear echoes of his Fifth Piano Concerto in E-flat major. Both of these works were also dedicated to Archduke Rudolph. The recapitulation in the trio is more a delicate transfiguration than a celebratory return: the principal theme reappears in an even softer form, *dolce* and *pianissimo*.

The second movement, the *Scherzo*, also has a cheerful character. However, in the trio section, darker tones prevail: a muted, extremely chromatic, winding minor theme is set

contrapunctually, but time and again, the tension is released in effusive, waltz-like bursts of joy.

The third movement features a wonderful set of variations in D major. Remarkably, Beethoven dispenses with the essential contrasts typical of variation movements; this movement is of serene beauty through and through. Strikingly, in the first and third variations, Beethoven anticipates Schubertian sounds in a time when Schubert was almost just a child. The theme and the final variation resonate with awe-inspiring wonder evoking *Fidelio's* Prisoners Chorus.

The final movement is filled with exuberance and joy; sharp rhythmic motifs in contradance style are interwoven with lyrical melodies. Similarities to the finale of the Ninth Symphony, which would come years later, are unmistakable in the *Presto* coda: the bass notes leap up and down in a nimble 6/8 rhythm, as high-register piano trills mirror a rapid flurry of eighth notes in the strings, until the piece comes to an end with a fulminant *Più presto*.

One can hardly believe that the trio op. 97 is actually closely tied to the tragedy of Beethoven's life. Beethoven's hearing difficulties were already at an advanced stage during the composition of this piece. Nevertheless, he performed the piano part both at the premiere and a further performance of this work. Accounts from his contemporaries noted that these performances provided little delight to the listener; by that time, Beethoven no longer had control over his own piano-playing, even though one could still witness the ingeniousness of the celebrated musician. These would be Beethoven's final performances: after the second performance of the Archduke Trio, the eminent pianist would bid farewell to the concert stage.