



Merz Trio
with Jordan Bak, viola
October 28, 2022

PROGRAM NOTES

Support for the program notes is generously provided by Roberta Viviano.

ERICH WOLDFANG KORNGOLD

(Brno, Czech Republic, 1897 – Los Angeles, CA, 1957)

Piano Trio in D major, Op. 1

Even without a name like "Wolfie," Erich Wolfgang Korngold would probably have been destined for musical greatness from birth. The son of an eminent Viennese music critic, (Leopold) Julius Korngold, Erich Korngold would begin studying with noted pedagogue and composer Alexander von Zemlinsky from the time he was twelve. The young Korngold would then go on to become one of the most influential and inspiring composers in modern Hollywood film music.

The Piano Trio, Op. 1, which dates from that first year with Zemlinsky and is dedicated to "my dear Papa," is certainly the type of work that hardly any twelve-year-old could pull off. Korngold's musical style is already fairly close to that of his "mature" works in this early trio. Bold gestures and dynamic contrasts are hallmarks of its nature. Intricately wrought textures are eschewed in favor of dramatic entrances between the instruments that constantly challenge, interrupt, and move the action forward. The *leitmotif*-like quality of the music with certain short themes repeatedly introduced and associated with shifts in character would become crucial to Korngold's later film style. Although Korngold came to be considered largely a "film composer," he never gave up writing opera and concert works, many of

which incorporate themes from the films and are enjoying a belated revival among performers and audiences.

GYÖRGY LIGETI

(Tarnaveni, Romania, 1923 – Vienna, Austria, 2006)

Loop, from Viola Sonata

IGOR STRAVINSKY

(Lomonosov, Saint Petersburg, Russia, 1882 – New York, NY, 1971)

Elegy for Solo Viola

TYSON DAVIS

(Raleigh, North Carolina, 2000)

Tableau XII

HEINRICH BIBER

(Wartenberg, Bohemia, 1644 – Salzburg, Austria, 1704)

Passacaglia

Various related themes run through the four solo works performed by Jordan Bak, among them: repetition, virtuosity, voice, and history.

As usual, Bak positions himself at the center of a rich universe of performers and composers for the instrument. Though Biber himself is the only composer who *also* composed, the other three works are all associated with notable performers: the Stravinsky Elegy was commissioned in 1944 by violist Germain Prevost of the ProArte Quartet in memory of Alphonse Onnou, his predecessor in the quartet; the Ligeti "Loop," the second movement of the Viola Sonata, was originally inspired by Tabea Zimmermann, who gave the premiere of the full work in 1994; and Tyson Davis' Tableau XII was commissioned by Bak himself as part of the 2021 WQXR Artist Propulsion Lab.

The works feel rich in the way they respond to an interconnected universe of pieces for the instrument. This is perhaps most evident in the Tyson Davis, which the composer links specifically to predecessors who wrote virtuosic solo pieces in the 20th-century: Berio, Persichetti, and Carter. Davis' work is fresh, poised, surprising, and restrained. The textures are sparse enough for the listener to be able to savor the delicate compositional choices being made, even on a first listen. The expressive contrasts lend themselves perfectly to Bak's lyrical but versatile approach to the instrument. A sense of

voice and virtuosity come through almost incidentally, with the focus less on the instrument itself than on the highly refined musical writing.

Two composers who move somewhat outside a purely composed style in their works are Stravinsky and Ligeti. The Ligeti, inspired by Zimmerman's "vigorous and pithy -- but always tender -- C string sound," consists of a series of forty-five looped double stops with a three-bar introduction. The work becomes increasingly frenetic as it moves along, though there is an indication to play "with swing," making for a clear jazz influence. The emphasis on the C string is notable for the unique register it lends to the viola, not shared by the violin. It certainly contributes to the "chant-like but muted" tone Stravinsky imagines for the instrument in his solo *Elegy*. It colors equally the Biber *Passacaglia*, the culminating movement of Biber's famous set of fifteen *Rosary Sonatas*. The Biber is characterized by a simple repeated bass line of four notes that take on an even darker character when performed on the viola as opposed to the violin.

Altogether the Biber ties together various themes from the previous three works: an unbridled virtuosity, creativity through repetition, viola-specific writing in Jordan's transcription, and of course, a nod to Stravinsky's neo-Baroque qualities in the *Elegy* through the inclusion of a famous Baroque masterwork.

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

(St. Petersburg, Russia, 1906 – Moscow, Russia, 1975)

Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 24

Shostakovich's First Piano Trio was written and performed when he was seventeen and still a student at the Leningrad Conservatory. More relevant to the music, it was written shortly after he had recovered from tuberculosis, and he had also just fallen in love. The love in question was the Trio's dedicatee, Tatyana Glivenko. The two met at the sanatorium, and she sufficiently captured Shostakovich's attention that he remained in long distance correspondence with her for the next ten years. The piece certainly displays a particular combination of ardent romanticism, rapturous joy, and ecstatic triumph we would expect from music written under such circumstances. Alternating with these scenes, however, are sections characterized by twisted chromaticism and underpinned with a feeling of malevolent dance. Shostakovich's teachers at the time took note of this quality in his music, describing it as an "obsession with the grotesque," a criticism that Shostakovich took as a compliment. Within the context of the Trio, the alternation between these different moods occurs with very little

transition, making for a strikingly unique and sometimes jarring musical form. Over the course of the piece, the form comes to make sense on its own terms, however. Extra-musically, we perhaps best understand these sudden scene changes when we realize that Shostakovich frequently accompanied silent films when he was young and even performed the Trio several times in that context. In the course of his work, it is also interesting to think of this dramatic influence as a precursor to his early operas, the genre he always loved most before he was tragically censored from writing in it.

ROBERT SCHUMANN

(Zwickau, Germany, 1810 – Endenich, Germany, 1856)

Piano Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 47

Robert Schumann's Piano Quartet in E-flat major, Op. 47, was written at the end of the so-called "Year of Chamber Music," a particularly fruitful year, 1842, which saw the composition of his three string quartets, the *Fantasiestücke* Piano Trio, Op. 88, and the Piano Quintet, Op. 44. The Piano Quartet and Quintet are often seen as twin works, both composed with Schumann's wife, wonderful composer and pianist Clara Schumann in mind, both culminations and ambitious expansions of the possibilities of the quartet and quintet genres to date. The Quintet has historically enjoyed more popularity and success: it is a more bombastic, public-facing work with more memorable thematic material. The Quartet, however, has an inner ardor and expressive warmth that makes it by far the more touching work. It also has a succinctness and tautness in its use of musical materials that it clearly draws from Beethoven, ranging from the first movement's slow introduction that also transforms into the material of its primary theme, to the second movement's Trio section that features suspended, alternating chords reminiscent of the Trio from Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 31 No. 3, to the third movement with its embedded variations, a classic Beethovenian device, to the finale with its fugal theme that harkens back to the finale of Beethoven's Op. 59 No. 3 String Quartet, and even the coda of the finale that recalls the stunning first movement finale of Beethoven's Op. 74 String Quartet. Above all, however, it is Schumann's passion rather than his devotion as a neo-classicist, however, that lends the Piano Quartet its wings and inspiration. Much of the material is constructed from simple scales, yet he draws from it continually inspired ideas, in particular the theme of the third movement, which is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful melodies from the romantic period.

Program Notes by Lee Dionne