

Sunday, November 17, 2024

Programme Notes

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Cello Sonata no. 3, in A major, op. 69 (1808)

Among his extensive chamber music catalogue, Beethoven wrote five cello sonatas. Two of them, published as his opus 5, were early works and the last two, opus 102, date from about a dozen years before his death. The Sonata no. 3 in A major, though, comes from the extraordinary decade which is sometimes referred to as Beethoven's "Heroic" Period (roughly 1803 to 1812). Indeed, the A major Sonata was written in 1808, right alongside the "Ghost" and "Archduke" Piano Trios, the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, and the Choral Fantasy (it's opus number places it exactly between the Sixth and the piano trios).

Though not as well known as the piano or violin sonatas, Beethoven's cello sonatas – particularly op. 69 – form what Lewis Lockwood calls "the foundation for the nineteenth-century cello sonata repertoire as it emerged in works by Mendelssohn, Brahms, and others." And it's easy to see why: much as he had done in the violin sonatas, Beethoven created a remarkably egalitarian relationship between cello and piano – the Sonata no. 3 is a showpiece for both instruments, not one accompanying the other.

The A-major Sonata is cast in the traditional three movement form but one of its most obvious quirks is the fact that it doesn't have a slow movement: the adagio introduction to the finale is the only spacious tempo in the whole piece.

The opening of the first movement presents yet another of the work's gripping idiosyncrasies: rather than beginning with a bold gesture from the piano or the duo, Beethoven opted to open with a solo cello line played softly – the effect is one of a piece being brought to life through improvisation. Gradually the piano joins, both instruments exchange short cadenzas, and the movement picks up speed. The remainder of the first movement is formally straightforward and strongly symphonic in character.

The second movement is a manic scherzo in A minor. The principle motivic ideas of the movement nervously outline the tonic triad and a scalar figure; the somewhat more relaxed trio features double stops in the cello over a two-note pedal point in the piano.

The finale opens with a short, slow introduction that recalls the beginning of the first movement and sets the stage for the lyricism that will follow. When the movement begins in earnest, it is with a cello figure that outlines an A-major triad over an insistent eighth-note pulse in the piano. The second theme alternates short phrases in the cello echoed by yet more percussive eighth notes in the piano. After a wild development, the movement makes its way to an emphatically triumphant conclusion, one that foreshadows the close of the great A-major Seventh Symphony.

Frank Bridge – Four Pieces for Cello and Piano, H. 107

Frank Bridge (1879–1941) was a pivotal figure in early 20th-century British music, known for his exploration of both traditional forms and progressive harmonic language. His *Four Pieces for Cello and Piano*, written in 1901-1910, is a compact but deeply expressive work that demonstrates Bridge's ability to balance lyrical beauty with subtle sophistication. These four character pieces reveal Bridge's sensitivity to instrumental color and his mastery of chamber music.

The set of four pieces is comprised of short movements, each rich with emotional depth and unique in character:

Berceuse (Cradle Song) The first piece, *Berceuse*, is a gentle, rocking lullaby. Marked by its lyrical, flowing melody in the cello, the piece evokes the soothing rhythm of a cradle song. The delicate piano accompaniment supports the cello's melody, with subtle harmonic changes that create an atmosphere of calm and warmth. This piece has a tender, almost serene quality, reflecting Bridge's ability to capture intimate moments through music.

Serenade The second movement, *Serenade*, brings a more playful and elegant mood. Its lilting, dance-like rhythm and graceful phrasing give it a sense of casual charm, as if inviting a quiet celebration or evening stroll. The cello's melodic lines are paired with light, staccato

piano textures, enhancing the relaxed yet refined character of the serenade. There is a sense of lyrical ease and fluidity throughout.

Elegie The Elegie is a deeply poignant and introspective piece. Its melancholy mood is expressed through a rich, sustained melody in the cello, which is subtly supported by the piano's harmonic progression. The movement is marked by its lyrical beauty, and the sweeping cello lines convey a deep sense of longing and sadness. The Elegie stands as a moment of reflective sorrow in the cycle, contrasting with the lighter, more playful tones of the other movements.

Cradle Song The final movement, titled Cradle Song (also referred to as Lullaby), returns to the theme of the first movement but with a slightly different character. This Cradle Song is tender and soothing, yet there is a sense of peaceful finality to the piece, as though it is bringing the set to a quiet conclusion. The cello's lyrical melody is again cradled by the piano, with gentle harmonic progressions and soft dynamics that create a serene and almost dreamlike atmosphere.