

TRIPTYCH 2

Untrodden Ways



Felix Mendelssohn - Trio in C minor Op. 66

Jennifer Higdon - Piano Trio

Reuben Jelleyman / J.S. Bach - Büchlein Reimaginings (selections)

Arno Babadjanian - Trio in F-Sharp minor

Felix Mendelssohn (GER; 1809 - 1847), Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor Op. 66 (1845), c.30'

I. Allegro energico e con fuoco

II. Andante espressivo

III. Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto

IV. Finale: Allegro appassionato

Mendelssohn was in Frankfurt giving himself some rare time off when he wrote this trio, one of the masterpieces in chamber music. He was by then one of the most famous composers in Europe, just as sought-after for his conducting as his compositions, and his schedule has to be seen to be believed. Conducting, he had just finished another tour of Britain with the London Philharmonic. Then, a period in Berlin working on masses of church music for the King of Prussia, theatre music that included the rest of his music for *Midsummer Night's Dream*. He had his newly founded Leipzig Conservatory to run, then just two years old; and all this on top of his own concerts at the Gewandhaus, where he was busy resurrecting J.S. Bach as well as giving all the most important premieres of his day (the Schumann piano concerto, the Schubert symphonies). In early 1845, the New York Philharmonic approached him with a lucrative offer for a concert tour of the US. He declined. He was exhausted. He holed up in his beautiful apartments with his family for a few months, working on this trio which he presented to his sister Fanny for her birthday the following year.

The piano launches straight into an unsettled, restless opening from which a yearning, lyrical melody soon emerges, first on violin, then on cello, with the piano accompanying, darkly. Perfect satisfying sonata form: exposition, development through different moods, recapitulation; the troubled atmosphere setting the scene for the lovely slow movement, anchored around a love duet between the violin and the cello. One of Mendelssohn's signature fleeting scherzos follows, light as air. And finally the magnificent fiery rondo, gradually moving the music from tempest into calm and including one of Mendelssohn's most inspired moments: suddenly he changes key, to the dominant five notes up, and a chorale appears

'Vor deinen Thron,' combined magically with the yearning fragments with which he began. It's a plea from the sinner to God not to abandon him when he dies and the chorale returns as the work's coda, driving towards a gloriously triumphant finale.

Jennifer Higdon (USA; b.1962), *Piano Trio (2003)*, c. 14'

I. Pale Yellow

II. Fiery Red

In 1972, Jennifer Higdon's father Kenny moved the family from the big city Atlanta, Georgia to a 40-acre farm in East Tennessee. He had left a career in engineering to become a commercial painter for a living and painted all day long, wanted to be closer to nature; and this move defined her. He always had the radio on, usually rock and roll or bluegrass. But one day he switched to the local classical station and Copland's Appalachian Spring came on while she happened to be standing in the dining room looking out at the Chilhowee mountains. 'And I thought – that music sounds like mountains. It literally dawned on me that you could depict things like nature, and emotions, in classical music.' Suddenly interested, her mother bought her a flute from a pawn shop and she taught herself, later being astonished to be accepted into Curtis; her professor at the time refused to let her out of the room unless she agreed to apply. Now teaching composition there, she quickly became one of America's most performed living composers with works in every genre and awards that include three Grammys, acceptance to the American Academy of Arts & Letters and the 2010 Pulitzer Prize.

She says of this piece:

"Can music reflect colours and can colours be reflected in music? I have always been fascinated with the connection between painting and music. In my composing, I often picture colours as if I were spreading them on a canvas, except I do so with melodies, harmonies and through the instruments themselves. The colours that I have chosen in both of the movement titles and in the music itself, reflect very different moods and energy levels, which I find fascinating, as it begs the question, can colours actually convey a mood?"

Kenny died in 2014, not too early to appreciate his daughter's enormous success; she has a huge black-and-white abstract painting of his hanging in her living room. 'Everyone runs into naysayers, but if you love something enough and feel passionately enough, you just go on ahead, walk right round the person saying it, proceed down the road and don't look back.'

~ INTERVAL ~

Reuben Jelleyman (NZ; b.1993), *Büchlein Reimaginings (2019/2023)*, c. 10'

Reuben Jelleyman is a composer from Tāmaki Makaurau. His music plays with the perception and memories of the listener, holding a delicate balance between the real and a multiverse of dreams.

He studied at Te KōkīNew Zealand School of Music and the Conservatoire de Paris. His works have been played by numerous ensembles internationally, such as Intercontemporain and Multilatérale (France), as well as in New Zealand by the likes of NZTrio, Stroma (NZ) and the NZSO. Reuben was awarded the SOUNZ Contemporary Award (2022) for his work *Catalogue* (2021).

About this work Reuben writes:

“Bach’s *Orgelbüchlein*, an exquisite collation of chorale preludes for organ, is no less replete with invention than his other works. While studying these pieces, my imagination was captivated by their beautiful architecture. On a whim I imagined transcribing them into ‘geometries’ beyond the ones that Bach used, attempting to extend and transform the structures I found. Much like the familiar images we see in the prints of M.C. Escher, the elegant Bachian structures of these chorale preludes are recognisable. Yet, they are warped by my own attempts to modify musical structure, using my own compositional techniques.”

Four of the *Büchlein* Reimaginings were written in 2019; the two new preludes were written for NZTrio in 2023.

Arno Babajanian (1921 - 1983), *Trio in F# minor (1952), c. 22'*

I Allegro

II Andante

III Allegro vivace

A national hero in Armenia, People’s Artist of the Soviet Union and Armenian SSR, when you hear this piano trio you will immediately wonder why Babajanian is not better known. Of course, the Iron Curtain is the reason. He did not quite make it into Glasnost, dying in Yerevan at the foot of Mt. Ararat where he was born and lived most of his life. And yet within those circumscribed parameters, he had an outsize effect. Yerevan is the ‘rosy city’, ancient (continuously inhabited since the 8th century B.C.), a haven for refugees from the Armenian Genocide and First City of the Soviet Union, built with pink marble in the first grand Soviet urban development 1924. It grew five times over in Babajanian’s lifetime. He was a child prodigy on piano, caught the notice of Khachaturian who sponsored his entrance to the Yerevan conservatory, just seven years old: study continued in Moscow, and the piano touring began that made him a household name throughout the Soviet Union, particularly for the great Russian concertos - Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, Shostakovich. When Shostakovich himself moved to Moscow in 1943 they became friends, Shostakovich calling him a brilliant pianist and brilliant teacher; and when Babajanian moved back to his old conservatory in Yerevan to teach, he was greeted by the perfect environment for his simultaneous urge to compose. He wrote prolifically, in all genres, partly inspired by the composers above, always by Armenian folk song and dance. His songs are particularly popular, as were his many Soviet films. The number of awards given him by the Soviet state and others (Medal for Defence of the Caucasus, Lenin and Stalin prizes, honorary citizenship of Texas USA) runs to 17.

He wrote this piano trio in the second year of his professorship back in Yerevan. It was immediately hailed a masterpiece and you can see why, right from the soft, melismatic string opening, a very Armenian theme that returns throughout the trio. A passionate development and recapitulation sets up a famous slow movement, often excerpted alone. The violin plays an achingly beautiful tune high on the E string, joined by the cello, exquisitely accompanied. And the allegro is a hugely energetic Armenian dance in 5/8, weaving that with great originality around a second melody soft and song-like; a fabulous piano interruption leads us back to the original theme and thrilling finale.

Programme notes by Charlotte Wilson 2024