

ECMS presents the Gryphon Trio

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By Morgan Luethe

Music lovers who braved the unforgiving weather at the end of January were well-rewarded with one of the **Gryphon Trio's** typically flawless performances. In an evening that presented a masterful survey of the genre, Canada's preeminent piano trio ensemble warmed audiences with a healthy dose of sturdy, invigorating music that left concertgoers with an appreciative glow.

First up on the program was a late piano trio of Joseph Haydn, the effective creator of the genre. At times, one might wonder if it wouldn't be simpler to compile a list of musical forms that Haydn *didn't* almost single-handedly create, especially when one acknowledges the clear and important influences of his works, both symphonic and chamber, on the music of his contemporaries and those that followed. The long and short of it is, that Haydn's contribution to the course of western classical music *is* undeniable and seismic. The *Piano Trio Hob. XV:29* represents the airtight formal and textural standard that Mozart emulated in his own piano trios, and that Beethoven was to work from in his. The Gryphon Trio gave an expertly balanced, refined of this late classical-era work that perfectly captured Haydn's famous gift for musical charm and humour.

The second offering of the evening's program was a work commissioned by the players themselves. The Gryphon Trio has made it part of their artistic mission to promote and celebrate the works of contemporary Canadian compositions. It was this sort of collaborative effort, with Sri-Lankan-born, Halifax-based composer Dinuk Wijeratne, that resulted in *Love Triangle*, a rhapsodic single-movement work for piano trio that captures and exquisitely blends melodic and rhythmic devices from the Middle-East and Northern India.

The ambiguous, propulsive motion of this work provides a fragrant, folksy underpinning to the quasi-improvisatory melodies passed around between the three instrumental parts. The Gryphon Trio conveys a deep understanding and appreciation for the music they commission; their account of Wijeratne's *Love Triangle* was and is definitive, not only because it was written for them especially, but because of the seriousness and care that they bring to their performances of

it. It's important that new Canadian work be often performed and celebrated – with work as attractive and multi-faceted as Wijeratne's it's easy to make a case for these efforts. *Love Triangle* is a thrilling piece of music that rightfully deserves its growing recognition and popularity among performers and audiences, alike.

Following the evening's intermission, the Gryphon Trio presented one of the tried and true masterworks of the piano trio repertoire, the *Piano Trio Op.8* of the young Brahms. For many, including this writer, the Brahms Op.8 is among the highest achievements in the genre, made even more astounding when one considers that Brahms was barely twenty years old at the time of its composition. This music must have held a special place in Brahms' creative mind as well, owing to the extensive revisions (and let's face it, improvements) he made to it some 45 years later. While the 1889 version of the Trio benefits from the older Brahms' unmatched musical expertise and experience (at the time, he was universally regarded as *the* most knowledgeable musician alive, in matters of composition and musicology), the hallmarks of youth are still apparent.

The work brilliantly binds the extremes of romantic passion, exuberance and despair together in an epic essay that betrays the remarkable transformation the piano trio had undergone as a genre, to that point, when set against the Haydn trio performed earlier. As is typical of Brahms' chamber music, the Op.8 *Trio* carries on the airtight formal logic inherited from the examples of classical era while raising it to thrilling emotional heights. The Gryphon Trio gave a muscular, well-defined performance of this well-loved work; Brahms as he *should* sound.

If the Gryphon Trio thought they'd get out of Robertson-Wesley United without giving an encore, they had another thing coming. Enthusiastic applause brought the group out once more to perform a bit of another pinnacle of the piano trio repertoire, Ravel's *Piano Trio in A Minor*. As a final salute to an appreciative audience, these supremely talented professionals brought off an electrifying rendition of the works' ferociously difficult second movement. A truly great concert ought to end with the audience begging for more; the Gryphon Trio practically had us on our hands and knees. May they return to Edmonton with their world-class art before too long. Bravo!