

TRIO SOLISTI

September 14, 2019 | by Morgan Luethe

Trio Solisti's mid-September concert at Robertson-Wesley United Church made for a powerful opening to the ECMS' 65th season, with a meat-and-potatoes program of Haydn, Dvořák and Schumann. Balancing classical restraint, folksy ebullience and dark romantic passion the evening's music drew from nearly eight decades of repertoire that gave not only interesting insight into the development of musical idiom over that time, but of the piano trio as a genre. The musicians of Trio Solisti are artists who each command attention in their own rights, too, conveying a sense of intense focus and absolute seriousness in their approach to the works presented.

There's little chamber music written between about 1780 and 1900 that doesn't, somewhere, bare the marks of Haydn's influence. While his virtually single-handed invention of the string quartet is rightly heralded as one of his most important contributions in the development of chamber music, it should be pointed out that the same can pretty much be said for his involvement in formulating and codifying music for piano trio ensembles as well. Trio Solisti chose the late Hob XV:29 trio convey the musical sturdiness and formal certainty that makes so much of Haydn's music, across nearly all genres, so foundational. The opening movement of the work was read at the measured, dignified pace that the music suggests; played at a moderate speed and within a classically 'sensible' dynamic range, the interpretation intoned that Haydn, here, was strolling and not running. From the good-natured stability of the first movement, the performance moved on to a similarly unassuming slow movement. From this music, the influence of Haydn's late chamber music on the young Beethoven (his combative pupil for a time), was clear. This became more-so apparent with the *attaca* (literally to 'attack' or launch into 'without a break') announcement of the trio's rambunctious final movement. Some of Haydn's most satisfying music is a result of his turning an interested ear to the peasant music of the day; fittingly a rhythmically gripping rustic barn-dance stamped with Haydn's irrepressible knack for musical humour provided a convincing end to the evening's first performance.

The Dvořák trio that followed was played with the right folksy soulfulness that makes the composer's chamber music such an attractive part of his oeuvre. The Op.26 trio is an exemplary work when it comes to seeing how Dvořák's music, overall, skillfully blends Germanic seriousness with irresistible Slavic tunefulness. Trio Solisti brought off the first movement with a sustained and gloomy tension that set up the following *Largo* as an achingly beautiful, bittersweet counterbalance. Dvořák's slow movements, and this is especially true of his chamber music, are often where a work's most direct and yearning melodic material is to be heard, and that of Op. 26 is no exception. If some of the Trio Solisti's most moving playing of the night unfolded during the *Largo*, some of their most robust and virtuosic arose in the final two movements of the work. A punchy scherzo with its lilting earworm of a middle, *trio* section was presented with impressive speed and vigour and carried the work to its summative final movement. Wistfulness set against a flirtatious rural bounciness provide the dramatic tension that propels the finale to its red-blooded finish, as if Dvořák finds himself no longer able to restrain the ecstatic Czech *dumky*-inspired rhythms that bring the thing to a close.

The D Minor Trio, Schumann's first, ended the evening's music, and thankfully so. Beyond his well-known E-Flat Piano Quartet, relatively little of Schumann's chamber music for piano and strings makes its way onto the programs of today's chamber music recitals. Like his symphonic works, Schumann's

chamber music doesn't lend itself to easy listening in the way that Mozart's or Haydn's does so readily. When works like his first piano trio *do* appear in concerts and are treated to such thoughtful and intentional performances as Trio Solisti's, the impact on listeners is strong. A thoroughly romantic piece through-and-through, the group brought an intensity and clarity-of-playing, the sort of which so benefits interpretations of Schumann's music overall. The churning murkiness of the work's opening flowed into the emotional contrasts of the middle development section with a sense of seamlessness. A composer who dealt in emotional extremes much of the time, Schumann's music challenges performers to communicate a cohesiveness that isn't often readily apparent. That the musicians of Trio Solisti for managed to do this is a testament to each member's mastery in understanding this music. A hiccupping scherzo movement, possibly an emotional diversion between the desperation of the first movement and the profound sadness of the third, gave the impression of nearly tripping over its incessant, dotted main rhythmic motif, only finding brief footing in a lilting *trio* section. Much of the turbulence of the two preceding movements evaporated with commencement of the third. As in the slow movement of the Dvořák work played previously, Trio Solisti offered an acutely sensitive and poignant reading of this deeply honest music. Schumann's music thrives on the fire of his emotional directness as an artist; rarely does he pretend to capriciousness or empty virtuosity for the sake of impressing an audience. Instead, as in the symphonic conclusion to the Op. 63 piano trio, he relies on the strength of his musical material. While it places considerable technical demands on each performer, Schumann is adamant that no one instrument outshine the other; this is a piano trio with the emphasis on "trio". Working away together, relentlessly, at one of Schumann's most rapturous melodies, the finale winds its way through contrasting textures before thundering to its conclusion like a steam engine. Here, Trio Solisti produced their most athletic playing of the night, proving that they, as a group, have the endurance to perform a work of this length and density in a way that makes it accessible to listeners of every ilk. Showing themselves capable of that, playing *any* music is remarkable; that they were able to with this work is even more so.

And so, the 65th season of the Edmonton Chamber Music Society is off to a terrific start. If Trio Solisti is a taste of the calibre of artists we can expect moving forward, then we'd all best be sure to secure our season tickets well in advance. See you at the next one!