Trio con Brio Copenhagen

Jens Elvekjaer, Piano | Soo-Jin Hong, Violin | Soo-Kyung Hong, Cello

Saturday, March 21, 2014 at 8:00 p.m.

Trio con Brio Copenhagen appears by arrangement with Lisa Sapinkopf Artists, www.chambermuse.com

The use of cameras and recording devices of any type is prohibited. Please silence all cell phones and paging devices. We ask that patrons please refrain from text messaging during the performance.
Program

Spell.................................................................PER NØRGÅRD (b. 1932)

Piano Trio No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 66..................FELIX MENDELSSOHN
   I. Allegro energico e con fuoco (1809-1847)
   II. Andante espressivo
   III. Scherzo, molto allegro quasi presto
   IV. Finale, allegro appassionato

-INTERMISSION-

Piano Trio in A minor, Op.50..................PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY
   Pezzo elegiaco (1840-1893)
   Tema con variazioni:
      Var I. Andante con moto
      Var II. Più mosso
      Var III. Allegro moderato
      Var IV. L'istesso tempo (Allegro moderato)
      Var V. L'istesso tempo
      Var VI. Tempo di Valse
      Var VII. Allegro moderato
      Var VIII. Fuga (Allegro moderato)
      Var IX. Andante flebile, ma non tanto
      Var X. Tempo di mazurka
      Var XI. Moderato
      Variazione finale e coda: Allegretto risoluto e con fuoco
      [Coda] Andante con moto - Lugubre

Program Notes

Spell
PER NØRGÅRD

Born in 1932, Per Nørgård (pronounced “Pair Ner-gore”) is the most prominent Danish composer after Carl Nielsen, and one of the most original figures in the cultural life of Denmark. His signature can be found almost anywhere in Danish music as a result of his animation, teaching, thought-provoking theories and cultural criticism. For more than 30 years his widely embracing musical personality has inspired and influenced a host of Scandinavian composers. Nørgård has written works in all categories, for amateurs as well as for professionals: from large-scale operas to modest hymns, from simple movements to imposing edifices. He received the Wilhelm Hansen Composer Prize 2000.
As a young man, Nørgård was a student of Vagn Holmboe, and his early works do show that he was inspired by the Nordic character of his teacher. During the late 1950s, Nørgård explored the possibilities in Central European modernism. His occupation with new structural approaches lead to the discovery of the so-called infinity row, a serial system or musical growth principle, which can be compared to the symmetrical formations of nature. This way of composing has been compared with fractal geometrical forms—repeating structures in an infinite, hierarchical system.

For Nørgård, the artistic universe is connected from beginning to end as one big work in progress. This is paradoxical, since in his music through the years, the composer has continuously broken with his own traditions, in the name of self-transgression: ironic pastiches, infinity rows, Golden Section proportions, beauty-seeking metaphysics in the 70s, via the wrestling of the 80s with great existential questions, centered around a large group of works strongly inspired by the schizophrenic artist Adolf Wölfli, to the experiments in the 90s with the phenomenon that Nørgård calls “tone lakes.”

Rationality and spontaneity, structure and freedom, yin and yang, local and global, system and chaos, art and kitsch, construction and expression—in Per Nørgård’s universe, opposites are constantly taken into consideration. The tension or interference in Nørgård’s music is this dialectic between opposite tendencies in the different layers.

Nørgård’s art constantly creates the vision that the potential of music is far greater than we think. The conductor Sergiu Celibidache predicted: “Only the mind of a new time in the new millennium will be able to understand the scope of Nørgård’s music.”

Spell, written in 1973, is the second of Nørgård’s three piano trios, which were composed over a span of nearly five decades. (Trio con Brio Copenhagen are the dedicatees of his third trio, which was commissioned for them for the composer’s 80th birthday festival). Between the first trio and Spell, Nørgård’s flirtation with the avant-garde had come and gone, leaving a legacy of balance between the old and the new. One feature of the first trio does remain—the tendency towards a linear conception, but now intensified to the point where even the piano is treated, at least in the opening section of the piece, less as chordal instrument than as one of three largely monophonic partners.

As Spell progressively brings together disparate strands of material, its textures grow more complex as well as more unified until, in the closing section, the music starts to disintegrate once more.

Nørgård devised a system of notation in which certain notes within larger groupings are singled out for dynamic variation. On several occasions the number of repetitions is left to the performer, so that the piece actually begins with the kind of aleatoric music with which the first trio ends.
Although recognized early as a child prodigy, Felix Mendelssohn was never exploited for this. His parents kept a watchful eye on other sides of his personal development; at the age of 12, he was even initiated into philosophy and literature by none other than the aging Goethe. Far from the typical suffering “romantic artist,” Mendelssohn was a hardworking family man without financial worries, a loving husband and a devoted father. A tireless supporter of the compositions of others, especially Bach, he founded a highly principled style of musical education and was a driving force behind the concert life in various European capitals. He was well-traveled and well-read, modest and courteous, and at the end of his short life (Beethoven and Schubert had recently died, while Chopin, Liszt and Schumann had yet to reach the peak of their fame), he was heralded by many as the greatest composer of his era.

Anti-Semitism led Mendelssohn’s parents to have their four children baptized and to add the less Jewish-sounding “Bartholdy” to their surname. But protecting the children from anti-Semitism through conversion proved to be a vain hope. Wagner would publicly question whether this “Jew” managed to give expression to the true German spirit. The monument erected to Mendelssohn in Leipzig was demolished on Kristallnacht—a precursor to the attempted total destruction of Jewish culture in Europe.

The exchange of letters between Felix and his older sister Fanny testifies to their profound relationship. In 1832, when he was 23, Mendelssohn wrote to his sister Fanny stating that, “I should like to compose a couple of good trios.” Not long after his marriage to Cécile Jeanrenaud, Mendelssohn did finally compose his two Piano Trios, the first in 1839 and the second in 1845. The Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66 was composed in 1845 in Frankfurt and dedicated to the composer Louis Spohr. At this time in Mendelssohn’s life his already delicate health was deteriorating and he was experiencing an overwhelming strain of dividing his time between his responsibilities in Berlin, Leipzig and London. In addition he was still grieving over the death of his father and his mother’s fragile health was cause for concern. Mendelssohn was bedridden when he commenced the C minor score and it is no surprise to discover that the work, over extended stretches, sounds like a musical account of those extremely difficult days. In many ways the C minor score is superior to its predecessor although the delights do not reveal themselves as easily.
The A minor Piano Trio was written as a memorial tribute to Nicholas Rubenstein, director of the Moscow Conservatory and brother of the pianist and composer Anton Rubenstein. Rubenstein had served as mentor, critic and supporter to Tchaikovsky, and had seen to it that Tchaikovsky’s works got the best possible performances. However, they did not always agree on matters musical. Despite the fact that Tchaikovsky had once described Rubenstein as a “heartless, dried-up pianist,” he was so devastated by Rubenstein’s death in March of 1881, as well as the illness of his sister, that he ceased work altogether until December of that same year. (As a result of Rubenstein’s death, Tchaikovsky was offered the position of Director of the Moscow Conservatory, which he declined.) He then began work on the piano trio—an instrumental combination he had heretofore felt antipathy toward (he had once written to his patroness Nadezhda von Meck, who was urging him to write a piano trio, that it was torture to him to have to listen to the combination of piano with violin and cello). The Trio bears the dedication “to the memory of a great artist.”

The Trio is a large-scale work in two sections. The first movement, in sonata form, is marked *Pezzo elegiaco*—elegiac piece. And that it is: melancholy, yet warm and passionate, filled with Tchaikovsky’s broad and lovely melodies. (A less charitable view of the work is taken by Alfred Einstein in Music in the Romantic Era, in which he characterizes it as an example of Tchaikovsky’s “yielding unreservedly to his lyric, melancholy, and emotional ebullitions.”)

The second part of the trio consists of a set of *variations* followed by a *finale* and *coda*. The simple folk-like theme for the variations is said to have been inspired by the memories of a happy day in the country, where Tchaikovsky and Rubenstein were entertained by peasants singing and playing for them. There are eleven variations of the theme, which is introduced by the piano. Here are some “landmarks:” in the first variation the violin presents the theme, followed by (what else) variation two, where the cello sings the theme as the violin provides a countermelody. If you hear what sounds to be a “scherzo” by the piano punctuated by pizzicatti from the strings you’re in the third variation. If it’s the theme played in the minor mode, you’re in the fourth variation. If you think you hear what sounds like a music box—piano in the upper register, with strings providing a drone, you’re in the fifth variation. After an intro of repeated notes by the cello, the group breaks into an elegant waltz—said to be evocation of Tchaikovsky’s opera *Eugene Onegin*. This sixth variation is a long one. If you hear the piano belting out chords, punctuated by the strings, you’re in the seventh variation. It’s a short one, and we’re coming down the home stretch. If you hear a lot of counterpoint, canons and
the like, you’re in the eighth variation—this from a composer who had no love for Bach and Handel. If it’s a lively mazurka you hear, why you’re in the 10th variation. One more to go. Almost. If you hear the cello plunking out a bass line to repeated notes on the piano, and a gradual dying away of the theme you’re in the 11th variation.

The finale actually starts out with yet another variation of the theme; festive and jubilant and developed at length. This manic mood eventually, but abruptly changes, as if the composer, lost in pleasant memories, is suddenly brought back to his pain at the loss of his friend. The melancholy opening theme of the first movement returns, orchestral and engulfing in its force. This gives way to a solemn funeral march, whose characteristic dum - dum - dee - dum rhythm is given to the piano, while the first movement theme given to the strings, itself dies away.

After he completed the work, Tchaikovsky had it played for some friends, as a result of which he made some revisions in the score. It was first privately performed in Moscow on March 2, 1882, with Sergei Taneyev (a noted composer and teacher) at the piano, N. Grimaldi on violin, and Wilhelm Fitzhagen on cello. The first public performance took place in Moscow on October 30, 1882.

The trio, and the second movement in particular, is arguably the most difficult piece Tchaikovsky wrote for piano, whether solo, with orchestra, or in a chamber group. It remains popular, in spite of its length, for its breathtaking lyricism and the cosmic finality of its final statement.

Program notes submitted by artist’s management.

Biography

TRIO CON BRIO COPENHAGEN

Trio con Brio Copenhagen is in great international demand and has an intensive worldwide touring schedule. Appearances this season include Washington DC, Los Angeles, Dublin, Hannover and Mannheim (Germany), the Evian Festival (France), Göteborg (Sweden), Trondheim (Norway) and Copenhagen among many other cities. In recent years, Trio con Brio Copenhagen has appeared in major concert halls in Europe, the US and Asia, such as Tivoli Concert Hall, the Concertgebouw, Carnegie Hall, Wigmore Hall, the Konzerthaus Berlin, the Seoul Arts Center, Bunka Kaikan Tokyo, and Teatro Olimpico Vicenza.

Since its inception the trio has won most of the international competitions for piano trio, including the ARD (Munich), Vittorio Gui (Florence) and Norway’s Trondheim Competition. In January 2015 the trio was the first ensemble to
receive one of Denmark’s most prestigious music awards, the P2 Artists Prize, at a live televised concert where they performed Beethoven’s Triple Concerto with the Danish National Symphony Orchestra. Other major awards received include the Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson International Trio Award (US) and the Allianz Prize in Germany’s Festspiele Mecklenburg-Vorpommern.

Trio con Brio Copenhagen continues to play a central role in Scandinavia’s vibrant contemporary music scene. Several of Denmark’s most prominent composers such as Per Nørgård and Bent Sørensen, as well as Swedish composer Sven David Sandström, have composed and dedicated works to the trio. Trio con Brio Copenhagen was enormously honored to be chosen by Per Nørgård to be the dedicatee of a work that was premiered at a festival in Stockholm celebrating his 80th birthday in 2012. Coming up in January 2016 is the world premiere of Bent Sørensen’s Triple Concerto with the Danish National Orchestra.

As founders and artistic directors of the Copenhagen Chamber Music Festival – a festival that is gaining more and more international attention – the trio is continually searching for new and interesting paths and directions in chamber music as well as innovative programming for the younger generation.

The trio’s debut CD was unanimously praised by critics. American Record Guide wrote: “One of the greatest performances of chamber music I’ve ever encountered.” Gramophone Magazine wrote: “the performances can compete with the best available . . . airtight ensemble . . . a superb, greatly gifted chamber group.” Their CD Phantasmagoria, of Danish contemporary music, has received rave reviews as well.

Trio con Brio Copenhagen is frequently featured as soloists in Beethoven’s Triple Concerto with orchestras. In 2011 the trio premiered a new Triple Concerto by the renowned Swedish composer Sven-David Sandström with the Danish National Symphony Orchestra and Kristjan Järvi in Copenhagen’s Koncerthuset. The following year, they were invited to perform the Triple Concerto with the Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra for Sandström’s 70th birthday concert in the Stockholm Konserthus.

As educators, the trio members teach at the Royal Academy in Copenhagen and give master classes on their international tours, including at Yale University, Rice University in Houston, and the Royal Irish Academy of Music, among many others.

The trio’s sound benefits from the superb instruments all three play: Soo-Jin plays a violin built by Andrea Guarneri from the 17th century, Soo-Kyung plays a Grancino cello, and Jens is Denmark’s first Steinway Artist. The ensemble was coached by the Alban Berg Quartet, Frans Helmerson, Mihaela Martin and Harald Schoneweg at the Cologne University of Music and received excellent musical guidance by Ferenc Rados in Budapest.
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