

ROSALIE PIANO TRIO

Michael Blaney, violin. Paul Christopher, cello.
Michael Young, piano.

Program Notes by Jackson Harmeyer

As in years past, our Fourth Annual Sugarmill Music Festival closes with a performance by the Rosalie Piano Trio. This, our resident ensemble, is named after our wonderful venue, the Rosalie Sugarmill, and consists of violinist Michael Blaney, cellist Paul Christopher, and pianist Michael Young. This afternoon they offer a tremendous program, including the *Kakadu Variations* of Ludwig van Beethoven, the Second Piano Trio of Felix Mendelssohn, and a world premiere by the ensemble's pianist Michael Young. Young's work is titled Nocturne for cello and piano, and it was composed specifically for this occasion. He has provided his own notes and plans to discuss the work more before its performance. We hope you will enjoy this final concert and that you will continue to support our endeavors in bringing first-rate chamber music to central Louisiana. Our festival is a local, homegrown effort and does not happen without your support. Thank you, and hope to see you next year, May 15-16-17!

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Kakadu Variations, Op. 121a for piano trio

Ludwig van Beethoven composed variations throughout his career. Sometimes these were parts of larger works, as in the theme and variations movements of the Third, Fifth, Seventh, and Ninth Symphonies. Sometimes these were standalone works. Beethoven often wrote variations on original themes, such as the *Eroica Variations*, Op. 35 for solo piano. At other times, his variations are based on existing themes by other composers, such as the celebrated *Diabelli Variations*, Op. 120, variations on national airs, or variations on themes by Handel, Mozart, and other well-known composers. Writing variations was not only a way for young composers to practice developing themes, but also a useful means for composers of any age to make some extra money: popular songs were not copyright protected in the same way they are today, so a composer could easily capitalize on a familiar tune while also showing-off his own inventiveness in varying it. The *Kakadu Variations*, Op. 121a, which we hear this afternoon follow this practice.

Their theme is the song, "*Ich bin der Schneider Wetz und Wetz*" ("I am the tailor, sharp and sharp"), composed by Wenzel Müller. Müller was a prolific theatre composer who directed the Leopoldstadt theatre in Vienna from 1786 to 1830. His *Singspiele*—comic operas, sung and spoken in the German language—were well-received in this city and were likely known to Mozart and Emanuel Schikaneder when they created their own *Singspiel*, *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*). The song which Beethoven uses as his theme in the *Kakadu Variations* is from Müller's *Singspiel*, *Die Schwestern von Prag* (*The Sister from Prague*), which opened in March 1794 and ran for over 130 performances. Of course, by the time Beethoven wrote his variations, which has been approximated to 1803, the song's lyrics were known on the streets of Vienna as "*Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu*" ("I am the tailor cockatoo").

After a dramatic introduction in G minor lasting almost a quarter of the piece, it is Beethoven's joke that the goofy pop song about the bird-tailor would unexpectedly appear. His introduction gives no indication of the tune, nor in his first edition, published in 1824, does he list the name of the theme. Instead, it appears, either to the amusement or irritation of its original audiences, more-or-less happenstance. For us, now two centuries removed, perhaps the sudden appearance of the quirky theme with its clucking and pecking of repeated eighth notes will still bring a small smile to our faces. Ten variations follow the initial statement of the theme as well as a concluding section marked, *Allegretto*. The variations are intriguing in that several are for either one soloist or combinations of two instruments. Until the late eighteenth century, the piano trio was viewed as a work for solo piano with string accompaniment. Only through Haydn, Mozart, and, ultimately, Beethoven did the two strings become equal partners with the piano. In this way and through the expansion of its typical formal plan into a four-movement work, the piano trio joined the string quartet as the other major genre of chamber music in the Classical era. The first variation is for piano solo; the second, for violin and piano;

and the third, for cello and piano. Later on, the violin and cello play the seventh variation without the piano, and the eighth is a call-and-response game between the strings on one side and the piano on the other. The variations are typically of a cheery quality, indicative of the cockatoo theme. The ninth variation, however, is melancholy in character, according to a long-held tradition in theme and variations form. The tenth variation is a crowd-pleasing romp, marked *Presto*, and then follows the *Allegretto* to conclude the *Kakadu Variations* in grand fashion.

Michael Young

Nocturne for cello and piano

Michael Young, a contemporary composer based in Natchitoches, Louisiana has written the following about his new piece, Nocturne for cello and piano, which receives its world premiere at the Sugarmill Music Festival: “My Nocturne for cello and piano is a lyrical piece in ternary form. After a brief introduction in the piano, the cello presents the principal theme, a nostalgic melody tinged with poignant chromaticism. The piano soon abandons its accompaniment role as the two instruments engage in a dialogue centered around five motives that form the basis for the rest of the piece. In the middle section, two features in the treble broken chord figuration in the piano, one rhythmic and one harmonic, contribute to the section’s rise and fall in tension. The figuration progresses from six to eight subdivisions of the beat and then slows to quintuplets. Meanwhile, the figuration creates a harmonic arch from seventh to thirteenth chords and then back to triads. Throughout the middle section, the two instruments continue their lively dialogue around the five motives, now supplemented by their inversions. One of these motives generates the chromatic key scheme of the middle section (B major, C minor, A Lydian, B-flat minor, G major, and G-sharp minor), which is supported by a series of bass pedal points that outline the six notes of the whole tone scale. In the final section, the principal theme dissolves into pensive solos for the cello and then the piano. After a final impassioned dialogue the music fades to a delicate end.”

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66

Felix Mendelssohn was a composer whose music was well-connected to the past. A devotee of Johann Sebastian Bach, he revived the Baroque master’s *St. Matthew Passion* through a celebrated performance he conducted in Berlin in March 1829; this concert has often been cited as the

beginning of the “Bach revival” as well as a new historical consciousness in the programming of concert music. His own oratorios, *Elijah* and *Paulus*, appeal to the tradition of George Frideric Handel and Joseph Haydn. Furthermore, Mendelssohn often emulated the grace and refinement heard in the music of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart as well as the drama and emotional vigor of Ludwig van Beethoven and Carl Maria von Weber. Mendelssohn was also active in the rediscovery of Franz Schubert, conducting the premiere of his Ninth Symphony, *The Great C major*, in March 1839. This was all at a time when the great musical minds of Paris, which in the 1830s and 1840s had supplanted Vienna as the musical capital of Europe, were calling for revolution. There, Hector Berlioz was maximizing the orchestra, increasing its size while also exploring new instruments and colorations; his works also transgressed genre boundaries, where a symphony might be a disguised concerto or oratorio. Giacomo Meyerbeer, meanwhile, was extending the extravagance of opera through his new “grand” operas whereas Franz Liszt was writing music for piano which made incredible virtuosic demands and challenged formal expectations. Together, Berlioz and Liszt would question the dominance of absolute music—music which exists abstractly, only for its notes and chords—in their creation of the program symphony and later, under Liszt, the single-movement symphonic poem. Richard Wagner would echo this position when he claimed that absolute music had died with Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. These developments were, in their creators’ minds, but a fulfilment of ideas already implicit in the music of Beethoven.

Mendelssohn, with his interest in music of the past, perceived a problem in all of this: few composers of stature were writing new chamber music. The piano trio, in particular, he believed, had been neglected by his contemporaries. In 1838, Mendelssohn commented, “A very significant branch of piano music, one that is very dear to me—for instance trios, quartets, and other pieces with accompaniment, in other words true chamber music—is now completely forgotten, and I find the desire to have something new in this genre all too great.” Throughout the 1830s, Mendelssohn promised to write piano trios of his own, but not until summer 1839 and the completion of his Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor, Op. 49 did Mendelssohn have any results to show. Its composition was a tedious process which involved several revisions. Yet, his efforts were recognized when Robert Schumann, his friend and one of the most revered music critics of his day, wrote of Mendelssohn and his new trio: “He is the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the most luminous of musicians, who sees through the contradictions of his time most clearly and

is the first to reconcile them... Happiest of all, indeed, are those who have heard the trio played by its creator himself." Within the decade, several of Germany's most significant composers would set about writing piano trios of their own, including Louis Spohr, Robert and Clara Schumann, and Mendelssohn's sister, Fanny Hensel; later, in the 1850s, Johannes Brahms would write his first of three piano trios. These works, in one sense a continuation of the Viennese Classical tradition, might not have come into existence if not for the initial impetus of Mendelssohn.

Mendelssohn composed the work we hear this afternoon, his Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor, Op. 66, without the same difficulties as his first. It was complete within three months, from February to April 1845. He was in Frankfurt where he could rest and spend time with his family, away from the stresses of a very public life as conductor in both Leipzig and Berlin. He had also, presumably, resolved the technical challenges in writing a piano trio through the composition of his first work in this genre and its tireless revisions. Mendelssohn himself gave its premiere at the Leipzig Gewandhaus on December 20, 1845: he played the piano part while his friends the violinist Ferdinand David and cellist Carl Wittmann, who had with Mendelssohn given the premiere of his First Trio five years earlier, joined him once more to introduce the Second Trio. Two weeks later, on January 4, 1846, they repeated their performance, this time in private at Mendelssohn's residence, where the Schumanns were in attendance. Mendelssohn dedicated the new trio to Louis Spohr, the eminent violinist, composer, and conductor with whom he had maintained an important friendship and working relationship for more than twenty years; Spohr had, in fact, dedicated his only piano sonata to Mendelssohn three years prior.

The Second Piano Trio is in four movements according to the Classical layout of fast-slow-scherzo-fast which we find in innumerable symphonies, string quartets, and other works of the era. The passionate C-minor first movement is marked *Allegro energico e fuoco* and follows a sonata form so rich in its variants that its exposition and recapitulation seem to take on aspects typically associated with the development section. The trio opens ominously with a swirling motive in the piano which it reiterates with building intensity; the strings then echo this same motive. Already this swift introduction indicates the role the strings will often play, as partners contrasted with the piano. As the texture thins, the violin introduces the piercing, bittersweet first theme over quick runs in the piano. The swirling introductory motive returns before the more contented second theme is played by the violin with some

foundational assistance from the cello; the piano echoes this theme in a brief solo before another variant on the introductory motive emerges. The development begins when the cello reiterates the tender second theme with more feeling than had been allowed earlier; the violin and piano soon echo this statement, and, for the first time, the anxiety of the swirling opening is banished. It does not remain absent, though it returns somewhat tamer than previously. Passion flares up once more in the recapitulation, and there is an extended coda before the first movement gallops to its halt.

The lyrical second movement, marked *Andante espressivo* and in the relative major key of E-flat, comes in stark contrast to the impassioned first movement. Its tender theme is first expressed through block chords in the piano; the strings in harmony soon join the piano in restating this theme. This movement has been likened to Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* for its plain, songful lyricism. At the arrival of a cello solo, we temporarily pass into a tearful section in the parallel key of E-flat minor. It is the natural outcome of wandering thoughts and is soon resolved into the contentment of the opening. The third movement, marked *Scherzo. Molto allegro quasi presto*, returns to the ferocity of the first movement. This G-minor scherzo is, uncharacteristically, in a simple duple meter rather than the more common triple meter. It, however, loses none of its dance feel, perhaps owing to Mendelssohn's construction of the theme or its deployment in quick interchanges between the players. The intervening trio section is in G major, gaining a plucky wit if not slowing down any as a typical trio might. It returns almost immediately to the scherzo section. The fourth movement, marked *Finale. Allegro appassionato*, is back in C minor, although it has lost much of the fury of the first and third movements. Its rondo form allows contrasting episodes to modulate into new keys, often in the major mode. Emerging in tandem with these major episodes are harmonized chorale tunes, artifacts of the Lutheran faith to which Mendelssohn belonged. Aided by these chorales, the major mode finally dispels the panicked anxiety and sadness which have lingered throughout the trio, so that the piece closes in the glorious key of C major.

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About Jackson. Jackson Harmeyer graduated with his Master of Music in Music History and Literature from the University of Louisville in May 2019 upon the completion of his thesis, "Liminal Aesthetics: Perspectives on Harmony and Timbre in the Music of Olivier Messiaen, Tristan Murail,

and Kaija Saariaho.” He has shared this pioneering research through presentations given at the American Musicological Society South-Central Chapter’s annual meetings in Asheville, NC and Sewanee, TN and at the University of Tennessee Contemporary Music Festival in Knoxville, TN. During his studies in Louisville, he was the recipient of the Gerhard Herz Music History Scholarship and was employed at the Dwight D. Anderson Memorial Music Library where he did archival work for the unique Grawemeyer Collection which houses scores, recordings, and documentation for over five thousand entries by the world’s leading contemporary composers. Previously, Jackson graduated *summa cum laude* from the Louisiana Scholars’ College in Natchitoches, LA. Then, from 2014 to 2016, Jackson served as director of the successful chamber music series, Abendmusik Alexandria. He has remained a concert annotator and organizer, co-directing the annual Sugarmill Music Festival. The scholarly writings he has produced for this festival have even attracted the attention of the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities. Aside from his studies, he is a composer, choral singer, and award-winning nature photographer.

Read additional program notes by Jackson at
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