

NOTES for OCTOBER 3, 2019

Somewhere an ancient WMCT odometer has just flipped over and I find myself, once again, contemplating a new season of *Music in the Afternoon* concerts. We begin the 122nd series with a program that certainly lives up to the eclectic approach that Trio Fibonacci has become famous for, with a well-loved classic by Beethoven coupled with names and repertoire that I suspect are new to most of you. Well, not Rachmaninoff, perhaps, but you may not have heard that work in this particular arrangement, so that too is new-ish.

Enrique Fernández Arbós, who was born in Madrid in 1863, trained initially as a violinist, first in Spain and then in Brussels with Vieuxtemps and in Berlin with Brahms' friend Joseph Joachim. At the age of 22, he became the concertmaster of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra and kept this position until 1902 when he was invited to take on the same position with the Boston Symphony. He remained in Boston for a couple of years and then returned to Spain to become conductor of the Orquesta Sinfónica de Madrid, which had been formed a few years earlier. He was to remain at the head of this group for the next thirty years, and he rarely played violin again. His output as a composer is limited to the years when he was still performing as a violinist. The trio on today's programme was probably written in the 1880s when he was living in Germany – there are references in his incomplete memoirs to playing at least some of this work to the German conductor Hans von Bülow. The three pieces use rhythms typical of popular Spanish music and it is probably for this reason that the composer includes the word "original" in the title to emphasize that these are completely his own invention and not based on pre-existing tunes. During his years as a violinist, Arbós formed a trio with Albéniz and the cellist Augustín Rubio, and the "Three Original Pieces in Spanish Style" or the "Spanish Trio," as the composer referred to them, were written for performance by them.

Falling Blue, the work on today's program, is Maxime McKinley's third piano trio and the second that he has written for the Fibonacci players. The work is, he says, "a tribute to the Canadian-American painter, Agnes Martin, who was often associated with minimalism, even if she herself preferred the label of abstract expressionism." McKinley says he was touched by her description of her creative process: "Artwork comes straight from a free mind - an open mind... Absolute freedom is possible. We gradually give up the things that disturb us and cover our mind. And with each relinquishment, we feel better." "*Falling Blue*" is the title of one of her paintings, and taking this as a starting point allowed the composer "to question the links between art and wellbeing, which I rarely do. Musically, the piece evolves towards calm, simplicity, even a certain innocence (a state dear to Agnes Martin), but the first few minutes are mostly agitated. Throughout the composition, I explored this theme: calm down to compose, compose to calm down." The work was composed in Montreal in 2019, with the support of the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ).

I suspect that Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* has been heard more times in arrangements than it has in its original form, which was as the last song of a

group of 14 published as his Op. 14 – but a song without text, that is, to be sung to any sound the singer might choose. The composer himself made an arrangement for piano and since then it has been arranged for almost every instrumental ensemble imaginable. An instrumental arrangement occupies a hall of mirrors since it is imitating a voice singing, but a voice singing without words, which is to say almost imitating an instrument.

Marie-Pierre Brasset kindly supplied the following notes about her composition, *L'Amoureux*, which is inspired by the “anonymous and inclusive discipline” of the Tarot, which she finds symbolizes “the most beautiful things of humanity.” “The Lover is the sixth Arcana of the Tarot de Marseille. This card has rich and complex meanings. There are four characters on the card, and, according to the interpretation of them, each of them may in turn be the Lover. This changing perspective constituted the modus operandi of my work which was written for Trio Fibonacci.”

Beethoven published the “*Ghost*” trio with a companion piece as his opus 70 and dedicated both works to Marie Erdödy. Beethoven’s relationship with this Hungarian countess, as with so many of his patrons, was often tempestuous. In the year that he composed this trio, Beethoven was offered the post of director of music to Napoleon’s brother Jérôme, who had been installed as the King of Westphalia. On learning that Beethoven might be leaving the Imperial city, three wealthy Viennese aristocrats were persuaded to come up with a counter offer in the form of a lifetime annuity, payable on condition that he remain in Vienna. This offer, which Beethoven accepted – and which later caused him some considerable problems because of inflation and the bankruptcy of one of the donors – was negotiated in part by Countess Erdödy. The dedication was undoubtedly in thanks for this, and probably an olive branch to heal a rift that had recently occurred between them: Beethoven had been lodging in the Erdödy home and had misconstrued, quite bizarrely, the sums of money that the Countess had been giving to Beethoven’s manservant. In spite of the rift, the first performance of the work was given in the Countess’s salon with the composer at the piano.

The “*Ghost*” Trio received its distinctive name from a remark made by the composer’s pupil, Carl Czerny, in notes that he wrote about how to perform all of his teacher’s piano works. The slow movement, says Czerny, is like the appearance of something from the underworld and would be quite appropriate for the first appearance of the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Although Czerny could not have known it, this music may indeed have been associated in Beethoven’s mind with a demonic Shakespearean world, but not that of *Hamlet*, but of *Macbeth*. Around the time of composition of the trio (1808) Beethoven was beginning preliminary work on an opera based on Shakespeare’s Scottish play. Sketches for this, which of course opens with a scene for the Witches, are to be found intermingled with work on the slow movement of the trio.

John Mayo