

JULY 11, 2024

CONCERT

“They Have Just Arrived At This New Level”

JAMES NEWTON HOWARD

Born: 1951

Composed: 2018

“They have just arrived at this new level” takes its name from a work of art by the artist Chris Johanson. The painting, which has hung in my studio for many years, is actually named “Balloon head,” but in small writing on the side of the canvas it has this mystifying fragment. I began writing the piece at the beginning of the year after a long, exhausting tour and nearly five months out of the country. Coming back home to the madness that was happening in America, I felt like this simmering insanity had reached a boiling point. The competing voices in the piece remind me of pundits arguing incessantly and seemingly eternally. These balloon heads on the wall that had been staring at me for years took on a more poignant meaning.

Program Note by James Newton Howard.

Horn Trio, Hommage à Brahms

GYÖRGY LIGETI

Born: 1923

Died: 2006

Composed: 1982

- I. Andantino con tenerezza
- II. Vivacissimo molto ritmico
- III. Alla marcia
- IV. Lamento. Adagio

Any work for violin, horn, and piano inevitably calls to mind Brahms' trio for those three instruments, composed (in part) as a memorial to his mother in 1865. Ligeti was quite aware of Brahms' example—and in fact he subtitles this piece “Hommage à Brahms”—though listeners will be hard put to detect any similarities between these two trios (beyond the fact, perhaps, that both are in four movements). But there are a number of larger cultural referents in Ligeti's Trio, and he has spoken of the influence of Beethoven, of characteristic national dances, and of classical forms on this music. Yet nothing is ever quite as it seems in this original music, which needs to be heard and understood for itself rather than being compared to other works.

Ligeti composed his Trio in 1982 after a five-year silence during which he had tried to sort out his own place in the evolving musical landscape at the end of the twentieth century. Serialism and the avant-garde had lost much of their appeal, but Ligeti was by no means anxious to embrace the “new expressionism” in music, and his Trio comes from the moment when he was reaching for new directions of his own—he himself has referred to this work as “conservative/postmodern.” In certain respects, the Trio is very much a conservative piece—it takes a classical model and employs such classical forms as scherzo and passacaglia. But the music has layers of meaning beyond its forms. For example, it begins with a reference to the three-note falling figure that opens Beethoven's “Les Adieux” piano sonata (Beethoven uses it there to suggest the words “Le-be wohl”: “farewell”). That figure will return in many forms throughout Ligeti's Trio, yet he notes even as he begins that it is a “false quotation,” and there will be many more of these oblique quotations in the course of the music.

Ligeti marks the opening movement *Andantino con tenerezza*: “with tenderness.” The falling three-note pattern recurs in a variety of forms here. A *Più mosso* central episode, introduced by pizzicato violin, leads to a return of the opening material and a sustained, near-silent close. The second movement is a lot of fun. Ligeti marks it *Vivacissimo molto ritmico*, but also specifies that it should be “fresh, sparkling, light, gliding, dancing.” The movement is in 4/4, but Ligeti subdivides that meter into an eighth-note pulse stressed in a 3+3+2 pattern, giving the music something of the feel of Eastern European folkdances; at the same time, the piano's jazzy ostinato seems to come from a different world altogether. The movement comes to an unexpected close: after all this energy, there is a moment of silence, the piano recalls the three-note pattern of the very beginning, and the music fades into silence.

The third movement, also nominally in 4/4, preserves some of the rhythmic asymmetry of the second. This is a powerful march (Ligeti marks it *con slancio*: “impetuous”), and this march makes its way along heavy accents. The movement is in ternary form: a flowing middle section, played with mutes, leads to an abbreviated return of the opening section, which now has a particularly brilliant part for the horn.

Ligeti establishes the mood of the final movement with its title, *Lamento*, and this finale—like that of Brahms' Fourth Symphony—takes the form of a passacaglia: here a slowly-descending bassline provides the foundation for a set of variations. The pervasive three-note pattern emerges from these textures (Ligeti marks them *dolente*: “grieving”) as this movement builds to a strident climax and then falls away to fade into nothingness.

This is music of extraordinary difficulty for its performers. The violinist must perform much of the trio in multiple-stops and artificial harmonics, while the horn part demands moments of unbelievable breath-control—the player must sustain high, quiet notes for long periods. Ligeti is also quite specific about the sounds he wants from the individual instruments: he makes clear, for example, that the piano must be kept open throughout the performance, and he also writes much of the horn part in natural harmonics so that the modern valved horn will sound like its predecessor, the valveless natural horn.

Piano Trio No. 7 in B-flat Major, Op. 97, “Archduke”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born: 1770

Died: 1827

Composed: 1810-1811

The archduke of this trio's nickname was Archduke Rudolph von Hapsburg, youngest brother of Emperor Franz. Rudolph studied piano and composition with Beethoven, beginning about 1804, when he was 16. A contemporary portrait shows a young man with fair hair and the full Hapsburg lips; he appears to have been blessed with a sense of humor. Beethoven remained fond of Rudolph, who was destined for the church, throughout his life; it was for Rudolph's elevation to archbishop that Beethoven composed the *Missa Solemnis*, and he dedicated a number of his greatest works to Rudolph, including the Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos, the *Hammerklavier Sonata*, and the *Grosse Fuge*, as well as this trio. For his part, Rudolph became one of Beethoven's most generous and reliable patrons, furnishing him with a substantial annuity for many years and maintaining a collection of his manuscripts. Rudolph, however, did not long survive his teacher—he died in 1831 at age 43.

Beethoven sketched this trio in 1810 and composed it during March 1811, shortly before beginning work on his Seventh and Eighth Symphonies. He was 40 years old and nearing the end of the great burst of creativity that has come to be known as his “Heroic Style,” the period that began with the *Eroica* in 1803 and ended in about 1812 with the Eighth Symphony. Beethoven was growing increasingly deaf at this time—an unsuccessful performance of the “Archduke” Trio in 1814 was his final public appearance as a pianist—and he would soon enter the six-year period of relative inactivity as a composer that preceded his late style.

The “Archduke” Trio seems well-named, for there is something noble about this music, something grand about its spacious proportions and breadth of spirit. At a length of nearly 45 minutes, it is longer than most of Beethoven's symphonies, but—unlike the symphonies—this trio is quite relaxed: it makes its way not by unleashing furious energy to fight musical battles but by spinning long, lyric melodic lines. It is as if Beethoven is showing that there is more than one way to write heroic music.

The nobility of this music is evident from the opening instant of the *Allegro moderato*, where the piano quickly establishes the music's easy stride (it is characteristic of this music that both outer movements should be marked *Allegro moderato* rather than the expected *Allegro*). The piano also introduces the slightly square second theme, and this sonata-form movement develops easily over its lengthy span. Strings open the huge *Scherzo*, with the piano quickly picking up their theme. Particularly striking here is the trio section—its deep chromatic wanderings alternate with an exuberant waltz and furnish the material for the coda.

The gorgeous *Andante cantabile* is a set of variations on the piano's expressive opening subject. These variations proceed by making this simple melody more and more complex: the music appears blacker and blacker on the pages of the score before it falls back to end quietly, proceeding without pause to the concluding *Allegro moderato*. Full of energy, this rondo-finale is also full of good humor and imaginative rhythms. The music flies to its close on a coda marked *Presto*.

Program Notes by Eric Bromberger