

The Piano Trio- a brief historical sketch

The era of the ensemble of piano, violin and cello, as a distinctive genre, encompasses the period from Mozart and Haydn (late 18th century) until the present. The evolution of this form of chamber music runs parallel to, and has been dependent upon, the continuous rise in popularity of the piano, which stands at the centre of this musical genre. As the piano evolved and grew in stature and social importance, the piano trio, along with other forms of chamber music with piano, attracted audiences, performers and composers alike. It became, and has remained, the musical vehicle for some of the greatest chamber music ever written.

Aside from the development of the piano as an instrument of major importance, there were other essential ingredients in the mix, which have added to the evolution of this chamber music format. One of these was the composition technique itself, which is involved in writing piano trios. This requires a composer being able to give distinctive but equally important roles to each instrument. Each instrument has its own idiom and range, and composers have had to learn how to exploit these distinctive qualities while at the same time integrating all three instruments in as homogeneous a way as possible. The greatest chamber music composers from the late eighteenth century to the present have become expert at this craft.

Chamber music of this type, along with string quartets and other small instrumental groupings, requires its audience to listen attentively and to actively engage with the music. Well written chamber music invites the audience to listen from inside the musical texture. Instrumental music is an abstract language; when we hear instrumental music, we recognise it as having speech-like qualities, though we don't know exactly what is being said. Chamber music, more than other musical genres, emphasises this; there is an obvious dialogue going on between the instrumental participants. Sometimes they 'speak' as individuals and sometimes they 'speak' together as one. Taking this 'music-as-discussion' idea a step further, rather than letting the music 'wash over' the listener, chamber music invites and rewards close observation, both aural and visual. In an intimate setting such as we have at Serenata, the audience can most easily become part of the musical action, sharing in the music-making with the performers. (Robert Constable July 2018)