

Prague Chamber Orchestra & The Eroica Trio

Friday, October 24, 8 pm, 2003
Zellerbach Hall

Prague Chamber Orchestra

Antonín Hradil, *artistic leader and concertmaster*

Eroica Trio

Erika Nickrenz, *piano*

Adela Pea, *violin*

Sara Sant'Ambrogio, *cello*

PROGRAM

Ludwig van Beethoven Overture to
The Creatures of Prometheus, Op. 43

Beethoven Concerto in C Major for Violin,
Cello, and Piano, Op. 56
(‘Triple’ Concerto)
Allegro
Largo & attacca
Rondo alla Polacca
Eroica Trio

INTERMISSION

Beethoven Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60
Adagio - Allegro vivace
Adagio
Allegro vivace- Trio: Un poco meno allegro
Allegro, ma non troppo

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Overture to The Creatures of Prometheus, Op. 43

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

It is perhaps hard to comprehend why Beethoven, an avid theater goer and lover, did not write more music for the stage. Even though he was highly drawn to theater music, *Fidelio* was the only opera he wrote; his output for the stage is rounded out by incidental music for three theatrical works (*Egmont*, *The Ruins of Athens*, and *King Stephen*), a few assorted overtures and short pieces of little consequence, and two ballets. He wrote his first dance piece, *Ritterballet* (WoO. 1), as a ghost-writer for Count Waldstein, who commissioned the work from the then young composer and presented it in 1791 in Bonn as his own composition. By 1801, however, Beethoven had already established himself as a gifted and important composer and no longer needed to write under assumed identities, or permit royal patrons to claim the glory for the fruit of his work. This was the year in which he was finally introduced as a composer to the Viennese stage, as the result of a commission to write a ballet for the Imperial Theatre; the work was *The Creatures of Prometheus*.

The producer of the *Prometheus* ballet was Salvatore Vigano, a Neapolitan ballet master hailed in his day for having brought ballet back from the exaggerated, inexpressive artificialities of the old Italian ballet to the simple forms of nature.’ The plot of the ballet, attributed to Vigano, is as follows: Prometheus creates man and woman from clay and water, and brings them to life with a brand of fire stolen from the sun. He has adapted in them the

best qualities of various animals, but failing to give them reasoning powers, he decides to destroy them. Apollo, the god of the arts, intervenes, and the creatures are led to Parnassus, where they become acquainted with music. Apollo then entrusts the furthering of their education to his wards, the Muses. Melpomene (Muse of Tragedy) provides the experience of tragic emotions, while Thalia (Muse of Comedy) teaches them to laugh. Terpsichore (Muse of Dance) teaches them her art, and Bacchus introduces them to the pleasures of wine and frolic. As their education is rounded off, the creatures finally begin to appreciate the beauties of nature; with one last solemn dance, they are sent to embark on the journey of life.

The Creatures of Prometheus received its first performance on March 28, 1801; the production was tremendously successful and was given 16 times that year and 13 the next. With the changing tastes in ballet over time, however, Viganò's choreography became *passée* and the ballet was relegated to obscurity. Consequently, the music was soon to be forgotten as well, but the Overture, on the other hand, remained

popular, and it was performed often during Beethoven's lifetime. And even if the rest of the music met with disuse, the composer was too fond of his handiwork to let it just slip into oblivion; two themes from the finale were later rescued by Beethoven to be incorporated into his own *Deutsche Contretänze*, a collection of original German dances. One of these two themes was also employed by the composer in his Grand Variations and Fugue for Piano, Op. 35, and was further elaborated and immortalized as the finale to the 'Eroica' Symphony.

Work on *The Creatures of Prometheus* began in 1800 and the Overture is believed to have been composed shortly before the ballet's premiere production the following year, coinciding with the composition of the Symphony No. 1. The Overture, Beethoven's first, is closely related to the contemporaneous symphony both in terms of its key as well as its mood of serene grace. Structural similarities may also be discerned between the Overture and the Symphony No. 1's first movement.

The Overture to *The Creatures of Prometheus* is built upon a modified sonata form. After a 16-measure introduction, the brilliant first theme (taken from the finale of the ballet) is presented; the tender second theme evolves from a simple triadic motif related to the first theme. After a subsidiary section, a short transitory passage leads directly to the recapitulation, eschewing a development section. This is followed by an extended coda that brings the Overture to its good-natured conclusion.

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Concerto in C Major for Violin, Cello, and Piano, Op. 56 ('Triple' Concerto) Beethoven

The object of much undeserved rebuke, intolerance, and misunderstanding, no other work by Beethoven—except perhaps the Choral Fantasy—has been so controversial regarding its merits as the 'Triple' Concerto. After its premiere performance, the *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* reported that '... we also heard a new Concertino by Beethoven which, however, was not altogether well received'; indeed, the work was never performed again during the composer's lifetime. Some pedantic critics

have commented on its 'dryness' of style and have expounded that its 'technical effort outweighs inspiration' and that it is a 'weaker work, which rouses expectations of great music it never fulfills.' Fortunately, today's experts no longer share these opinions about Beethoven's Concerto for Violin, Cello, and Piano, Op. 56. For instance, the eminent musicologist Sir Donald Francis Tovey insists that 'If it were not by Beethoven, but by some mysterious composer who had the romantic good fortune to die before it came to performance, the very people who blame Beethoven for writing below his full powers would be the first to acclaim it as a work of a still greater composer.' And Tovey further emphasizes: 'Without the Triple' Concerto, Beethoven could not have written the Piano Concertos in G and E-flat [Nos. 4 and 5], nor the Violin Concerto.'

Beethoven's 'Triple' Concerto has been unjustly overshadowed by the composer's better-known concertos. The tendency has been to wrongly regard it as a backward-looking homage to the Baroque *concerto grosso*, when in fact it is a highly original work that takes its lead from the *sinfonie concertanti* as established by Stamitz, Dittersdorf, and Johann Christian Bach, and is propelled from where Haydn and Mozart left off. Labeled a 'Grand Concerto Concertant' in its first printed edition of 1807, this work was written in 1803-04 for Beethoven's young pupil, the Archduke Rudolph. It was the Archduke who performed the piano part at the work's premiere in Vienna's Augarten in May of 1808 (the other two soloists were violinist Anton Seidler and cellist Nikolaus Kraft, the latter for whom Haydn had written his cello concertos). Dedicated to 'his Majesty' Prince Lobkowitz, the composer's patron, the 'Triple' Concerto comes from the same period as the 'Eroica' Symphony, the first version of *Fidelio*, and the 'Waldstein' and 'Appassionata' piano sonatas.

Built upon a vast sonata form, the first movement begins quietly with the double basses intoning the main theme in a mood of some mystery, before the whole orchestra assertively takes it up. The violins then present the secondary theme in the dominant key. After a third subsidiary theme that serves as a bridge, the soloists in the 'concertino' group—the cello, joined by the violin, and followed by the piano—make their entrance, each one with its own statements of the main theme. With great contrapuntal skill, and often with the reduced texture of chamber music, the themes are then elaborated and brilliantly varied by the three soloists and orchestra alike in the harmonically daring development section. After a *pianissimo* climax that gives way to a beautiful *cantabile* passage for the soloists, the orchestra charges forth with great *élan* to bring the first movement to a brilliant close.

With a dark and solemn mood, which foreshadows the slow movement of the Fifth Piano Concerto, a short Largo in 3/8 time makes up the middle movement. It begins with a long-breathed, *cantabile* melody on the solo cello.

supported by a quiet string accompaniment; this expressive theme is then assumed by the woodwinds as the piano plays accompanimental figurations, before the solo violin claims its share. A somber and mysterious passage leads directly and without pause into the finale, a procedure that Beethoven would employ again in his next two piano concertos.

Although the polonaise was not uncommon as a finale at the time, the present *Rondo alla Polacca* provides one of only three examples of this form in Beethoven's works. The cello calmly introduces the recurring main theme that is taken up in turn by the other two soloists. As the orchestra comes in, the proceedings gather the momentum that propels the rest of the movement. Between the varied re-statements of the main theme, the trio of soloists shines with brilliant chamber-like clarity in the secondary episodes. After the brisk, penultimate statement of the theme in double time, the solo trio plays its written-out cadenza against occasional chords in the orchestra. As the final *pianissimo* trill of the cadenza swells and fades away, the polonaise theme returns in its original tempo to bring the concerto to its ceremoniously elegant and triumphant conclusion.

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Symphony No. 4 in B-flat Major, Op. 60

Beethoven

Count Franz von Oppersdorf, an amateur musician with the reputation of maintaining an excellent orchestra, once had the great opportunity of performing Beethoven's Second Symphony while the composer was in attendance. In 1806, when Beethoven had occasion to visit Count von Oppersdorf's castle, the Count commissioned him to write a symphony and paid him in advance. Instead of a symphony, however, the Count received in 1808 a letter of apology from Beethoven stating that he had been forced, on account of circumstances, to sell his most recent symphony known today as the Fifth Symphony but he promised the Count that the work intended for him would be forthcoming shortly. The symphony finally presented to the Count, which bears the dedication to him, was the Fourth Symphony, composed in the summer months of 1806. Count von Oppersdorf was particularly irked by this turn of events, as this symphony had not only been performed already — it received its first performance in March of 1807 at the house of Prince Lobkowitz in Vienna — but it had also been met with a less than highly acclaimed reception. As one critic noted, the symphony contained a 'wealth of ideas, bold originality and fullness of strength,' but yet he went on to complain of the 'neglect of noble simplicity' and the 'excessive amassing of thoughts.' As a result of this episode, the relationship between Beethoven and the Count terminated on unhappy terms.

The vast introduction to the first movement (Adagio) sets a mysterious atmosphere, somewhat dark in character. The lowering unison

B-flat, *pianissimo* in the winds and *pizzicato* in the strings, quietly unrolls, revealing the unusual tonality of B-flat minor, the minor mode of the symphony's official key. As the music develops, modulations to remoter keys occur until the tone A, with dynamics intensifying, is reached, thus serving the leading-tone function to the key of B-flat Major. The rapid pulse of the Allegro vivace is established by a rushing string figure that, following a wide-ranging first subject and a witty, somewhat imitative second subject with the woodwinds predominant, returns as the main subject of the development section. The development, containing modulations to both related and unrelated tonalities, suddenly shifts back to the tonic of B-flat. A drum roll wittily signals the transition to a regular recapitulation. The movement concludes with a brief coda that makes use, once again, of the string figure that served as the main theme of the development section.

The second movement, Adagio, is marked by a pervasive, steady, and unchanging pulse. The *cantabile* melody of the violins is of particular beauty, consummately lyrical. Beethoven combines the gently inflected turns of this theme with a harmonic texture of extraordinary intricacy and subtlety, while still providing forceful and dramatic climaxes. The second subject, played by the clarinet, is exceptionally tender and scored with a degree of finesse remarkable for a composer even of Beethoven's stature. The pulsing rhythmic figure, akin to a musical heartbeat, is heard from the solo bassoon and echoed by the cellos and basses, then re-echoed by the timpani. From this pulsing arises the flute that leads us back to the ornamental return of the main melody.

The third movement presents the listener with jaunty rhythmic displacements and modulatory sequences, Beethoven leaving the tonic key almost immediately after its start, as if to avoid a possible monotony of key. The entire scherzo is repeated before moving on to the Trio. This section gracefully contrasts the woodwinds with the strings and continues a somewhat ambiguous treatment of tonality. The Trio, as well, repeats in its entirety.

The finale is impeccably adroit in its construction and is spirited and playful in character. The first theme contains running sixteenth note figures providing a feeling of perpetual motion. In contrast, the second theme acquires a dance-like quality, especially given its triplet accompaniment figures, before returning to the running sixteenth note figure that persists until nearly the end of the movement. The entire movement captures the flavor of the finales of Haydn's last symphonies in its robustness and high spirits. It is, however, unmistakably pure Beethoven.

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'Each musician is a maestro,' heralded an American critic during the first North American tour of the Prague Chamber Orchestra Without Conductor (translation of its full Czech title). An ensemble of more than 30 musicians, the Orchestra plays without conductor, sustained instead by the superb musicianship of each player, and is renowned for its exquisite precision, intonation, and balance. In rehearsal and performance, each individual contributes as an interpreter, similar to more intimate chamber music ensembles. The Orchestra's repertoire ranges from the Baroque to the 20th century and often includes compositions by today's leading and active composers.

The Prague Chamber Orchestra holds a unique and leading place among the orchestras of the Czech Republic. In

1951, first desk players of the Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra in Prague came together to found a smaller orchestra suitable for performing works of Bohemian composers of the Classical period. This was marked by the first recording of the Orchestra on October 22, 1951, with the Orchestral Quartet of Karl Stamic.

The Orchestra's quality received immediate recognition at home when, on June 14, 1952, it appeared at the Prague Spring Festival. The advent of the Orchestra came at a time when there was a move away from large symphony orchestras playing Baroque and early Classical period music, so its pioneering excellence in this field was well received. Due to the growth of its activities, it became increasingly difficult for the members to continue their work with Czech Radio Symphony Orchestra. By 1965, the Prague Chamber Orchestra became a state-funded independent body. After the collapse of the Communist system in 1989, it was necessary to look for a new status for the Orchestra, and in 1991, the members took over the management of the ensemble and set up their own concert agency.

The repertoire of the Prague Chamber Orchestra is based first and foremost on the major Classical works of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. It reaches back to the High Baroque period with the music of Bach, Handel, and Vivaldi, as well as forward into the early Romantic period (Schubert and Mendelssohn).

The Orchestra's repertoire also includes music of the 20th century, such as the neoclassical works of Britten, Honegger, Prokofiev, and Stravinsky. Alongside these is repertoire from Czech composers including the Benda family, Dusek, Jirovec, Kozeluh, Rejcha, Michna, Myslivecek, the Stamic family, Vanhal, Vor'sck, and Zelenka. Compositions by Dvořák, Janůček, and Martinu are included from the later period, as are those of later Czech composers, many of whom have written works especially for the Prague Chamber Orchestra.

The Prague Chamber Orchestra has thrilled audiences around the world with regular tours of the United States, Canada, Europe, Russia, Latin America, and Asia. It appears regularly in such cultural centers as Leningrad, Moscow, Vienna, London, Rome, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Washington (DC), Chicago, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Tokyo. Eighty percent of the Orchestra's work takes place abroad.

In Prague, the ensemble gives its prestigious for-subscribers-only series in the Dvořák Hall at Rudolfinum. The group's sterling reputation has attracted such renowned artists as Arturo Benedetti-Michelangeli, Paul Badura-Skoda, Salvatore Accardo, Barbara Hendricks, Heinrich Schiff, Barry Tuckwell, Hans Jürg Schellenberger, Rudolf Buchbinder, Emil Gilels, Henryk Szeryng, Maxim Vengerov, and the Beaux Arts Trio.

The ensemble has recorded for Supraphon, Denon, BMG, Decca, and Telarc, among others. Awards include Supraphon's Golden Record and the Grand Prix du Disque Akademie Charles Cros. The ensemble's radio and television tapes, made in Prague and other European cities, number over 500. Today the Orchestra issues recordings under its own PKO label. In this connection, especially, the Orchestra occasionally chooses to work with conductors, and recognizes the benefits such collaborations can bring. Excellent examples are the recordings of Mozart symphonies under Sir Charles Mackerras.

The Prague Chamber Orchestra is currently on its fourteenth North American tour, which has been timed simultaneously with the release of their EMI/Angel recording of the Beethoven 'Triple' Concerto with the Eroica Trio as soloists.

The Eroica Trio holds a preeminent place among today's chamber ensembles. Whether playing the great standards of the piano trio repertoire or daring contemporary works, the three young women who make up this world-class ensemble electrify the concert stage with their combination of technical virtuosity, vivid artistic interpretation, and contagious exuberance in performance. The Trio is

the winner of the prestigious 1991 Naumburg Award, which resulted in an acclaimed Lincoln Center debut and active touring of the United States, Europe, and Asia. While maintaining a demanding concert schedule, the Eroica has released five celebrated recordings for Angel/EMI Classics Records, garnering multiple Grammy nominations.

Highlights of the 2003-2004 season include tours of the United States with the Prague Chamber Orchestra and, next spring, the Cincinnati Symphony; the release of the Trio's sixth recording for Angel/EMI, the Beethoven 'Triple' Concerto with Prague Chamber Orchestra; and the world premiere of a new work composed for the Trio by composer-violinist Mark O'Connor at Montalvo Center for the Performing Arts in Saratoga, California (March 2004). The Trio also continues to perform recitals throughout the United States.

The Eroica Trio performs the Beethoven 'Triple' Concerto more frequently than any other group in the world, having appeared with the symphonies of Chicago, St. Louis, San Francisco, Utah, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Houston, and Seattle, as well as the Mostly Mozart Orchestra. The group has also performed the work on tour abroad with Orquesta Sinfonica de Euskadi in Spain, Haydn Orchestra in Italy, and Budapest Symphony in Germany. In March 2003, the Eroica appeared on German television, performing the 'Triple' Concerto with the Munich Symphony (the program will air in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland this fall).

The Eroica Trio is on the vanguard of a new generation of artists who are changing the face of classical music. One of the first all-female chamber ensembles to reach the top echelons of its field, the Eroica Trio is helping to break an age-old gender barrier. As the *Chicago Sun Times* remarked 'Our image of the piano trio is largely formed by groups like the celebrated [original] Beaux Arts, three middle-aged gentlemen who apply their wisdom and artistry to their chosen repertory. That image is about to change.' The Trio took its name from Beethoven's passionate Third Symphony. Italian for 'heroic,' it is a word that aptly reflects the ensemble's approach to their art.

The Trio has established a unique identity by creating innovative programs that span 300 years of music. A typical Eroica Trio concert might include the Baroque symmetries of Vivaldi, the passion of Brahms, and Paul Schoenfield's contemporary *Café Music*, with its echoes of jazz, spiritual, and theater music. Last season the Eroica Trio premiered Daniel

Schnyder's Trio in America.

Immediately following its acclaimed Carnegie Hall debut in 1997, the Eroica Trio was offered an exclusive five-record contract by Angel/EMI Classics Records, which was extended in 2002 to include three additional recordings. The Trio's self-titled debut CD, which features works by Ravel, Benjamin Godard, a commissioned arrangement of the Gershwin Preludes, and Paul Schoenfield's *Café Music*, was awarded NPR *Performance Today's* 'Debut Recording of the Year.' The ensemble's second disc, released in the fall of 1998, concentrates on the works of Dvořák, Shostakovich, and the trio's own arrangement of Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise*, and was nominated for two Grammy Awards. The group's critically acclaimed third recording, *Baroque*, was released in 1999 and spent nine months in the Top 20 on Billboard's charts. *Baroque* includes works by Bach, Vivaldi, and the Eroica Trio's own arrangement of Albinoni's Adagio. The group's next album, *Pasin*, was released in 2000 and features Argentinean, Brazilian, and Spanish composers, including Piazzolla, Villa-Lobos, and Turina. The group's fifth album for Angel/EMI Classics Records, dedicated to the music of Brahms, was released to great acclaim in January 2002. The disc features the composer's lullaby, arranged for piano trio by Sara Sant'Ambrogio.

The women who make up the Eroica Trio are all top-ranked, award-winning soloists and have performed on many of the world's great stages. Pianist Erika Nickrenz, who made her concerto debut at New York's Town Hall at the age of 11, was a featured soloist on the PBS series *Live from Lincoln Center*. In the spring of 2003, she gave a performance and rang the opening bell for the New York Stock Exchange as part of Steinway's 150th anniversary celebration. Violinist Adela Pe—a garnered first prize at the Washington International Competition and has toured extensively as a soloist in the United States, Europe, and South America. She has appeared with the English Chamber Orchestra, in recital at Carnegie Hall, and on live European television, broadcast from Paris. Cellist Sara Sant'Ambrogio's international successes include winning a medal at the prestigious International Tchaikovsky Violincello Competition in Moscow, resulting in tours across North America, Europe, and the Middle East, and culminating in a recital at Carnegie Hall that was broadcast on national television. She also won a Grammy Award for her recording of Leonard Bernstein's *Arias and Barcaroles*. In addition, she has enjoyed collaborating on rock, pop, and jazz CDs and on movie soundtracks. She will appear with Olympia Dukakis in an independent film later this year.

The Trio members share a unique history, and have known each other since childhood. Erika and Adela began performing together at age nine. Three years later, Erika and Sara studied both piano and chamber music with Isabelle Sant'Ambrogio, Sara's grandmother. As a teenager, Adela coached chamber music with Sara's father and first teacher, John Sant'Ambrogio, principal cellist of the St. Louis Symphony. In the early years of the Eroica Trio, coaches included Mr. Sant'Ambrogio as well as Erika's father, the noted violist Scott Nickrenz. Since the Trio signed with Angel/EMI Classics Records, five of its CDs have been produced by Erika's mother, three-time Grammy Award winner Joanna Nickrenz. Future musicians Zachary (born to Erika) and Neal (born to Adela) were both welcomed into the Eroica Trio family in the spring of 2001. The Eroica Trio is based in New York City, where its members maintain a close musical and personal friendship.

Prague Chamber Orchestra

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