Shane McCauley

Ax/Kavakos/Ma Trio

Sunday 9 September 2018 3pm, Hall

Brahms Piano Trio No 2 in C major
Brahms Piano Trio No 3 in C minor

interval 20 minutes

Brahms Piano Trio No 1 in B major

Emanuel Ax piano
Leonidas Kavakos violin
Yo-Yo Ma cello

Part of Barbican Presents 2018–19

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Welcome

A warm welcome to this afternoon's concert, which marks the opening of the Barbican Classical Music Season 2018–19.

The concert brings together three of the world's most oustanding and charismatic musicians: pianist Emanuel Ax, violinist Leonidas Kavakos and cellist Yo-Yo Ma. They perform the three piano trios of Brahms, which they have recorded to great critical acclaim.

The trios span Brahms's career – the First, in B major, was published when he was just 21, though he did thoroughly revise it some 35 years on, and it is this later incarnation that we hear today. What is striking is how confidently Brahms handles the piano trio medium, as if undaunted by the legacy left by Beethoven.

Trios Nos 2 and 3 both date from the 1880s and were written during summer sojourns – in Austria and Switzerland respectively. While the Second is notably ardent and unfolds on a large scale, No 3 is much more compressed and full of fiery drama.

It promises to be a very memorable concert. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

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Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

Piano Trio No 2 in C major, Op 87 (1880–2)

1 Allegro · 2 Andante con moto · 3 Scherzo: Presto – Poco meno presto
4 Finale: Allegro giocoso

Piano Trio No 3 in C minor, Op 101 (1886)

1 Allegro energico · 2 Presto non assai
3 Andante grazioso · 4 Allegro molto

In June 1880, during a holiday in the Austrian spa town of Ischl, Brahms began work on two new piano trios, one in C major, the other in E flat. He completed the opening movement of each, and showed the pieces to some of his closest friends – among them the surgeon Theodor Billroth. From his response we glean what little there is to be known about the E flat major movement: 'Seldom', Billroth told Brahms, 'have I had the impression from your manuscripts of such effortless creativity as I have from these two movements.' He went on:

> They are in both form and content classical – popular chamber music in the best sense of the term. The paths in Ischl must be particularly even and good, since nowhere does the pace let up. There is also no trace of the rain that can so often make one feel out of sorts in the Salzkammergut. May things only continue in so smooth and lively a fashion; I think these beginnings will not bear heavy middle movements. As to whether one finds more pleasure in E flat major or in C major depends on the mood of the moment. My first impression has remained with me: the E flat is so lively right from the beginning, and continues in the same way. It is particularly crowned by the impression the second subject makes through the fact that it first appears on the stringed instruments alone. Through its contrapuntal further development it appears increasingly beautiful without ever becoming ponderous. The C major begins rather more seriously, rhythmically very characteristic. To me the second subject is almost too soft, melodically and rhythmically turned in on itself ... But these are just first impressions. You must know better ... I'm now very eager for the following movements.

As things turned out, Billroth had to wait a long time to see the remainder of the C major Trio. As for the E flat major project, the always self-critical Brahms abandoned it altogether, and destroyed the one movement he had composed – a piece which Clara Schumann, who was another member of the Brahms circle privileged enough to see the two trio movements, actually preferred to its companion. Not until 1882 did Brahms take up the threads of the C major Trio again, and complete it with the addition of three further movements.

The opening Allegro of the Op 87 Trio contains an unusual wealth of thematic material: an imperious first subject given out in octaves by the violin and cello alone, a shadowy chromatic subject, a further smooth idea played by the strings in octaves, and a gracious closing theme in a dotted rhythm. The central development section finds room to elaborate all of these except the last; and in characteristic fashion, Brahms continues the music's developmental argument through the opening stage of the recapitulation, right up to the straightforward reprise of the second subject. There is also a substantial coda, in which a sweeping augmented version of the main theme first heard in the development makes a splendid return.

The slow movement is a set of variations on a melancholy theme in A minor which again finds the violin and cello playing in octaves. The theme itself, with its characteristic 'short–long' rhythm, betrays Brahms's fascination with the Hungarian gypsy style. For the penultimate variation the music turns from minor to major, creating an expansive legato melody of great beauty. The new rhythmic pattern of the major-mode variation

is maintained in the last one, in which the two stringed instruments discourse above a piano accompaniment in rippling semiquavers which allows the music to die away into the distance.

The scherzo turns back to the minor. It is a mysterious, fleeting piece whose predominant dynamic marking is *pianissimo*, though its shadowy character is offset by the C major confidence of the soaring melody in the trio section. The Finale is one of those good-humoured rondos (with more than a hint of variation form thrown in for good measure) at which Brahms was so adept. Much play is made of the staccato repeated-note figure with which the piano accompanies its opening theme; and towards the end that theme reappears in a subdued augmented form, as though in echo of the procedure adopted in the opening movement.

The summer of 1886 found Brahms at the Swiss resort of Hofstetten. There, in the idyllic surroundings of Lake Thun, he completed three very different chamber works: a grandly conceived Cello Sonata, Op 99, a relaxed and lyrical Violin Sonata, Op 100, and the dramatic C minor Piano Trio, Op 101. The Trio is one of Brahms's most concentrated and intense scores. There are no preliminaries here: the main theme is immediately hurled forth in a sonority of orchestral power. That theme has two limbs: a sinuous line in its upper voice, and a rising scale in the bass. As early as the second bar, the two voices are exchanged, with the pianist's right hand playing the scale figure, and his left the sinuous phrase. It is these two ideas that propel the greater part of the opening movement; and even the much more relaxed second subject, in which the violin and cello once again sing out in octaves, is based on a broadened version of the rising scale. As in the C major Trio, the development is fused with the first stage of the recapitulation, in a continually evolving passage; and there is a lengthy coda which prolongs the developmental argument.

In one of his evocative similes, the great music writer Donald Francis Tovey described the scherzo of the C minor Trio as a piece that 'hurries by, like a frightened child'. Not that the piece is all that fast, but it does share the spectral character of the scherzo from the Second Trio. This time, the strings are muted, and the middle section – hardly a trio in the conventional sense – does little to disturb the nocturnal atmosphere.

Brahms originally notated the slow movement with an unusual time-signature producing seven beats to the bar, before opting instead to divide the metre into a recurring pattern of a single bar of three beats followed by two of two beats. Brahms has the piano and strings alternating, with the violin and cello taking the lead. The pulse quickens for a middle section maintaining both the music's metrical irregularity (the impression created here is of five beats to the bar) and its basic alternation between strings and piano.

The finale sets off with what might be described as an intensified form of a 'hunting' rondo theme. In fact, the piece turns out to be a sonata form, and its concentration on the minor is almost unrelieved until the onset of the coda. Here, at last, the music turns to the major and the violin transforms the main subject into a flowing melody not dissimilar to the theme of the trio section from Op 87's scherzo. Even at this stage, however, the music's dramatic sweep remains undiminished, and the work ends as powerfully as it began.

interval 20 minutes

Johannes Brahms

Piano Trio No 1 in B major, Op 8 (1853—4; 1889)

1 Allegro con brio · 2 Scherzo: Allegro molto · 3 Adagio · 4 Allegro

On the last day of September 1853 Brahms called at the house of Robert and Clara Schumann in Düsseldorf. To the astonished couple, the 20-year-old composer proceeded to play his piano sonatas (Schumann found them 'more like veiled symphonies'), and

showed them some of the chamber music he had already written. The following year, in a famous article entitled 'New Paths', Schumann hailed Brahms as a musical Messiah. To Brahms, that article was the source of some discomfort: 'The praise you lavished on me in print', he told Schumann, 'will have raised public expectations of my abilities to such an extraordinary degree that I don't know how I will be able to do justice to them. Above all, it leads me to be extremely cautious in my choice of material to publish. I think I shall not publish any of my trios.'

Brahms is known to have destroyed several of the pieces he showed to Schumann; but, for all his reticence about allowing his music to see the light of day, he did sanction the publication of his early Piano Trio in the unusual key of B major, which appeared in November 1854 as his Op 8. However, no sooner had the piece been accepted by the Leipzig firm of Breitkopf & Härtel than Brahms had second thoughts about it. He would gladly have held on to it, he confessed to his violinist friend Joseph Joachim, in order to make changes. For a performance in Vienna in 1871 Brahms apparently shortened the opening movement, but it wasn't until 35 years after the trio's original publication that the occasion to make a thorough revision presented itself. In 1888 Breitkopf sold the rights in Brahms's music that had appeared under their imprint to the composer's principal publisher, Fritz Simrock of Berlin. When Simrock invited the composer to consider revising some of his earlier music Brahms eagerly seized the opportunity to recast the trio he had written at the age of barely twenty-one. 'You cannot imagine how I trifled away the lovely summer,' he told Clara Schumann in the autumn of 1889. 'I have rewritten my B major trio and can now call it Op 108 instead of Op 8. It will not be so chaotic as before – but will it be better?' Brahms's rhetorical question has been answered by posterity in the affirmative – so much so that the original version of the work has more or less dropped out of sight.

The revisions Brahms carried out to his B major Trio (in the end, the original opus number was retained) were so thorough that they amounted to a recomposition. Of the four movements, only the scherzo – a piece of Mendelssohnian lightness – emerged more or less unscathed. Elsewhere, Brahms retained the most memorable inspirations of his first version (the broad opening melody of the first movement for the piano and cello; the wonderfully serene initial subject of the slow movement, with the piano's calm chorale-like melody answered by the two stringed instruments; the disturbingly unsettled character of the finale's main theme), but he replaced extended passages with entirely new material. The discarded sections included the second subject in both outer movements, a somewhat academically-inclined fugue subject and its subsequent working-out in the opening movement, and the middle portion of the slow movement. Miraculously, although the new insertions were such a vast improvement over the original material, Brahms managed to integrate them seamlessly into the score, with no discernible stylistic rift.

One highly unusual, youthfully impetuous, feature of the early B major Trio the mature Brahms did respect was the fact that not only is its finale in the minor, but it also fails firmly to establish the home tonality at all until its closing pages. It's true that two of Haydn's late string quartets have a finale whose first half is in the minor, but in each case the music's tension is resolved through a major-mode conclusion. Brahms takes Haydn's idea a stage further, and actually ends his work with the music still despairingly in the minor. He was to write a minor-mode finale to a work otherwise in the major on two further occasions – the Third Symphony, and the G major Violin Sonata, Op 78 – but not without resorting to a peaceful ending in the major. Whether the bleak finale of the B major Trio was inspired by a premonition of the tragic events that were about to unfold in the Schumann household (the composer's suicide attempt in February 1854, followed by his voluntary confinement in an asylum) must remain an open question; but certainly, it forms a startlingly dramatic conclusion to the work as a whole.

About the performers

Shane McCauley

Emanuel Ax, Yo-Yo Ma and Leonidas Kavakos

Emanuel Ax piano

Emanuel Ax was born in modern-day Lvov, Poland, and moved to Winnipeg with his family as a young boy. His awards have included a Young Concert Artist Award, First Prize in the Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition, the Michaels Award and the Avery Fisher Prize.

This season he returns to the orchestras in Cleveland, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Washington, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Nashville and Portland, Oregon, concluding the season with a recital in Carnegie Hall. In Europe he returns to the Rotterdam Philharmonic, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Amsterdam, Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia in Rome, Deutsches Symphonie-Orchester Berlin, and the radio orchestras of Hamburg, Hanover and Munich, as well as touring with the Budapest Festival Orchestra to Belgium, France and Italy.

Tonight's concert with Leonidas Kavakos and Yo-Yo Ma is part of a tour of Europe and the USA following the release of their recording of the Brahms piano trios on Sony Classical, with whom Emanuel Ax records exclusively.

He is also a committed exponent of contemporary music, with works written for him by John Adams, Christopher Rouse, Krzysztof Penderecki, Bright Sheng and Melinda Wagner. Most recently he has added HK Gruber's Piano Concerto and Samuel Adams's *Impromptus* to his repertoire.

Chamber music is also a vital strand of his music-making and he has worked regularly with such artists as Young Uck Kim, Cho-Liang Lin, Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer, Peter Serkin, Jaime Laredo and Isaac Stern.

He resides in New York City with his wife, pianist Yoko Nozaki, with whom he has two children. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and holds honorary doctorates of music from Yale and Columbia Universities.

Leonidas Kavakos violin

Greek violinist Leonidas Kavakos is recognised as an artist of rare quality, known for his virtuosity, his superb musicianship and the integrity of his playing. By the age of 21, he had won three major competitions: the 1985 Sibelius Competition and the 1988 Paganini and Naumburg competitions. He was the first to record the original Sibelius

Violin Concerto (1903–4), which won him a *Gramophone* Award in 1991.

Over the years he has developed close relationships with some of the world's leading orchestras and conductors. This season he tours North America and Europe with Yo-Yo Ma and Emanuel Ax, performing Brahms and Schubert trios and will be the Artist-in-Residence with the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra.

This summer he signed an exclusive recording contract with Sony Classical, marking a return to the label for which he previously recorded the violin concertos of Mendelssohn and Mozart. He has recently recorded the Brahms trios with the artists with which he appears this evening. His first solo project with Sony is the Beethoven Violin Concerto, which he will direct from the violin. This will be followed by the complete Bach Solo Sonatas and Partitas. He has also recorded for Decca, BIS and ECM.

Leonidas Kavakos is the 2017 winner of the Léonie Sonning Music Prize and was *Gramophone*'s Artist of the Year 2014. He plays the 'Willemotte' Stradivarius violin of 1734.

Yo-Yo Ma cello

Yo-Yo Ma's multi-faceted career is testament to his enduring belief in the power of culture to generate trust and understanding. Whether performing new or familiar works from the cello repertoire, collaborating with communities and institutions to explore culture's social impact, or engaging with unexpected musical forms, he strives to foster connections that stimulate the imagination and reinforce our humanity.

He founded Silkroad to promote cross-cultural performances and collaborations at the point where education, business and the arts come together to transform the world. He is a member of the Silkroad Ensemble which tours annually and for which more than 80 works have been commissioned. He also serves as the Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant to the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Negaunee Music Institute.

His work focuses on the transformative power music can have in the lives of individuals, and on increasing the number and variety of opportunities audiences have to experience music in their communities.

Yo-Yo Ma was born in Paris to Chinese parents who later moved the family to New York. He began studying the cello at the age of 4, attended the Juilliard School and in 1976 graduated from Harvard University. He has received numerous awards, among them the Avery Fisher Prize (1978), the National Medal of Arts (2001) and the Presidential Medal of Freedom (2010). In 2011 he was recognised as a Kennedy Center Honoree. Most recently, he has joined the Aspen Institute Board of Trustees. He has performed for eight American presidents, most recently at the invitation of President Obama on the occasion of the 56th Inaugural Ceremony.

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Lisa Batiashvili © Sammy Hart

Mon 12 Nov

Thibaudet/ Batiashvili/ Capuçon Trio

Trios by Shostakovich, Mendelssohn and Ravel