

BEETHOVEN'S ARCHDUKE

Friday 12 February, 5.30pm and 8.30pm
Federation Concert Hall, Hobart

Emma McGrath violin

Jonathan Békés cello

Karen Smithies piano

SCHUBERT Notturmo in E-flat, D 897 (10')

BEETHOVEN Piano Trio in B-flat, Op 97, 'Archduke' (40')

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) composed the single-movement Notturmo in what would turn out to be the last twelve months or so of his short life. The Notturmo was most likely written as the slow movement of the first of two piano trios composed in 1827-8, the Piano Trio in B-flat D 898. For whatever reason, Schubert wrote a substitute slow movement for D 898 and the Notturmo became a stand-alone work. Schubert was known for his lyrical gifts above all – he composed more than 600 songs – and the Notturmo opens with a tuneful, sentimental theme, the violin and cello playing in sweet parallel thirds over arpeggiated chords in the piano. This, the principal theme, will return on numerous occasions, its appearances broken up by episodes of a more turbulent nature. In addition to his talent for fashioning a tune, Schubert had a particular skill for harmonic sleights of hand. In the Notturmo, for instance, we commence in the key of E-flat before transitioning into E (!) and F thence returning to E-flat for the first reappearance of the principal theme.

The 'Archduke' Piano Trio by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) predates Schubert's Notturmo by nearly twenty years, having been composed in 1810-11. It is the last of Beethoven's piano trios and is not just his final work in this genre, but a crowning achievement. The first movement of the four-movement 'Archduke', Allegro moderato, commences with a noble, spacious theme marked 'dolce', or sweetly. The key is B-flat and the unhurried, tuneful melody is a fine example of Beethoven in a relaxed and expansive mood. The theme is announced by the piano – which was Beethoven's instrument – before being taken up and restated by the violin. The Scherzo movement comes second, not third, and here Beethoven has fun with material as plain and unadorned as a scale. We remain in B-flat and the principal theme, which is ushered in by the cello, is nothing more than a rising B-flat scale dressed up with a jaunty rhythm. The violin joins in and the two instruments, cello and violin, share between them simple ideas based on stepwise patterns. The Trio, which is the contrasting section in the Scherzo, is all closely interwoven and gnarly and has the texture of a fugue. The fugue subject is announced by the cello before being answered by the piano and then taken up by the violin. The slow movement, Andante cantabile, ma però con moto, is in one of Beethoven's favourite forms: theme and variations. We're presented with a hymn-like theme at the outset, which is delivered with great solemnity by the piano. We know from the testimony of many of Beethoven's contemporaries that he was without peer when it came to improvising at the keyboard – it's something he could do for hours – so we're on very solid ground when he turns his attention to theme and variations form. We segue into the final movement, Allegro moderato, and the mood lightens straightaway. Here, short and snappy dotted rhythms prevail and the 'Archduke' comes to a close with an upbeat and brilliant coda. Beethoven dedicated Op 97 to his pupil, patron and good friend Rudolph of Austria, youngest brother of the Emperor, hence the nickname.

Robert Gibson, Tasmanian Symphony Orchestra, © 2021

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