

THE GENESIS OF THE PIANO TRIO

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SUMMARY. The process leading to the crystallization of the piano trio can be traced back to the beginning of the 17th century, a time when artists would perform under the patronage of noble families. A change in taste in the mid-18th century based on an appreciation for polyphony eventually determined the elimination of the basso continuo, the particularization of the voices and equalized the importance of the different instruments of the trio. The contributions of J. S. Bach, G. F. Haendel, as well as the French harpsichordists, J. Ph. Rameau and L. G. Guillemain with their accompanied sonatas, J. Haydn and specially W. A. Mozart, introducing the technique of multiple thematic development marked the path of the piano trio becoming a concert genre in its own right.

Keywords: piano trio, chamber music, basso continuo, Viennese Classicism, Haydn, Mozart.

As in the case of other musical genres, it is difficult to settle upon a precise “date of birth” for the piano trio, as well. The difficulty arises from the fact that the appearance of the piano as an accepted instrument in chamber music groups progressed slowly through a long process of its own validation. The end of this process coincides in many ways with musical classicism (especially Viennese Classicism). As a result, we will take as our reference point the development of the genre specifically through the creations of the great classic composers Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven.

It must be said, though, that the piano trio is an integral part of the chamber music genres, which have gradually been introduced into the musical culture connected to instrumental practices. For this reason we believe it necessary to first sketch out a few earlier points of reference, before continuing to a more meaningful segment of instrumental works belonging to this large category of chamber music compositions.

Chamber music represents one of the basic ways for a group of musicians to collaborate. The continual evolution of instrumental chamber music

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began along with baroque art. As early as the beginning of the 17th century, the important noble families began to take interest in chamber music and to solicit the piano trio (harpsichord, violin and viola da gamba) for their own personal entertainment, amusement and private delight. This form of patronage was very valuable for the composers of that epoch, because in this way they were freed from the financial concerns and thus were permitted to devote themselves to their art. However, the genre had a long path to travel and many stages to pass through (for example, the replacement of the *basso continuo*) before reaching its maturity, which was attained in classical period by W. A. Mozart.

The first compositions in the area of instrumental chamber music were written by Biagio Marini, a composer and virtuoso violinist whose remarkable contribution to the crystallisation of the chamber music style is the establishment of the system of *basso continuo* as a foundation for instrumental chamber music. He wrote many works for two violins and *basso continuo*.

The genre was further cultivated by composers such as Giuseppe Torelli, Giovanni Legrenzi, Giovanni Battista Mazzaferata, Giovanni Battista Vitali.

One of the more significant composers, Arcangelo Corelli (1653-1713), composed numerous volumes of sonatas *da chiesa* and *da camera* for two violins and harpsichord, volumes which cover his opuses 1 through 5 (12 Sonatas *a tre*, Op. 1; 12 Sonatas *da camera a tre*, Op. 2; 12 Sonatas *a tre*, Op. 3; 12 Sonatas *da camera a tre*, Op. 4; 12 Sonatas for violin and harpsichord, Op. 5). He made the change from two violins and harpsichord to one violin and harpsichord, bringing greater individuality to the violin.

Other composers, who contributed to the development of chamber music repertoire, thus becoming part of the process of evolution of this genre, include Heinrich von Bieber, François Couperin and Henry Purcell.

The influence of Johann Sebastian Bach is also of great import: the repertoire, the importance he gives to the organ and harpsichord, and the concentration of an ensemble of voices into one "instrument," all served to spur on the process of detachment and emancipation of instrumental music. There are some early indications about the importance of the harpsichord as a solo instrument in the sonatas *a tre*, around the year 1720, in which the harpsichord abandons its usual function and begins to take on a new *obbligato* role.

Although antecedents of the piano trio are not clearly evident before the 18th century, there are some early indications of the integration of keyboard instruments, as solo instruments, into chamber music. Remarkable examples can be quoted from the different sonatas for flute or viola da gamba "en trio" by J.S.Bach, dated around the year 1720, in which the harpsichord abandons its usual function of continuo and begins to take on its new role of *obbligato*. As a substitute for a missing instrument (probably not an uncommon problem), the upper range of the harpsichord could easily provide a melody above the bass line of equal importance to that of the solo instrument. Thus the harpsichord

continued on an ascending path toward a new type of artistic collaboration in the chamber music genre. This method is well illustrated by the Sonata for harpsichord and viola da gamba in G Major, BWV 1027, which was composed around 1720, and which has an early version for two flutes and *basso continuo*, BWV 1039. In this case, the original parts for the flute are distributed, with the necessary adjustments, to solo gamba and the right hand of the harpsichord, giving the ensemble a tonal colour completely different from that of the original version. The transcription for organ of the last movement of this sonata, which Bach called *a tre*, is also interesting for our subject. It appears in the catalogue of Bach's works as BWV 1027a. It is also important to mention the four trios for organ BWV 583-586, in d minor, g minor, c minor and G major.

Georg Friedrich Haendel contributed numerous works composed for two oboes and *basso continuo*, or for two violins and oboe or flute.

Also, the experiments made by French harpsichordists from the late baroque are of a great significance. They sought to change the traditional role of the instruments by giving them a different physical placement in the ensemble, bringing the harpsichord to the fore as a solo instrument and relegating the strings to an accompanying role. This new genre, cultivated in Paris in the first half of the 18th century, was later called (perhaps for the first time) the "accompanied sonata" by musicologist Eduard Reeser. One of the first composers who cultivated this genre was Jean Joseph Cassanea de Mondonville, whose works, published in 1734, as Op. 3 under the name of "Pieces for Harpsichord, in sonatas with violin accompaniment," can be considered the first belonging to this genre. These pieces called on all the technique necessary to a harpsichordist for the interpretation of pieces for solo harpsichord, as well as all the technique specific to the solo sonata for violin. After him followed French composers with works structured similarly, including the *Pieces de clavecin en concert* (1741) by Jean Philippe Rameau and *Pieces de clavecin en sonates* (1745) de Louis Gabriel Guillemain.

Rameau's *Pieces* were written for harpsichord and a solo instrument (to be chosen from the following: violin, flute, viola, or a second violin). In spite of the dominant role of the harpsichord, one can sometimes observe the tendency toward greater importance for the accompanying instruments, which contribute to the musical discourse with solo passages, imitative counterpoint and echo effects in a baroque manner full of colour. Thus, Rameau surpassed the limits of his time, and the publication of this cycle was an exceptional contribution to his epoch, anticipating many particularities of the classical piano trio, later developed and strengthened by Mozart.

Mondonville and Guillemain's methods were less innovative: in their collections the accompaniment is reduced to such a subordinate role, in contrast to that of the harpsichord, that it mattered all too little whether they were present or not. The optional instruments served either to enrich the colour of the

ensemble, to strengthen the weak sonority of the harpsichord by doubling certain lines at the unison, or to enrich the texture with chords, arpeggios and imitations. Guillemain offers his comments in a note, suggestively entitled *Avertissement*, from which one can deduce many of the characteristics of these accompanied sonatas: "When I composed these pieces, my first thought was to write them for the harpsichord only, without including accompaniment, observing that the violin's sound takes over that of the harpsichord, and makes it difficult to distinguish the melody. But according to the taste of our time, I did not feel that I could leave out the additional parts, which require extraordinary finesse in the playing, in order to allow the harpsichord to be clearly heard. Those who so wish, may play these sonatas with or without accompaniment. They will lose nothing of the musical subject matter, as the harpsichord contains all." This optional role was given to the violin by other composers of the time, as well.

The conclusion drawn from this commentary, about the major preoccupation of the musicians of that time in the direction of balance, is indeed interesting. This preoccupation is evident from the frequent indications found in the violin scores of that epoch, to use a mute, or to adapt and diminish dynamics, in order to avoid covering the delicate sound of the harpsichord. As a general change in musical style and taste took place towards the middle of the 18th century, through which polyphony gave way to the new conception of homophonic music, the role of keyboard instruments greatly increased. It became the ideal instrument for the late sonatas, allowing the possibility that one single musician could interpret the melody as well as the accompaniment, make variations in style, and radical changes in texture. This change, however, did not immediately bring about the decline of the accompanied sonata. Even so, the solo sonata gained in importance and was widely cultivated for wealth of musical possibilities it offered: colour, warmth deriving from the timbres of the different instruments, and endless possibilities of enriching the interior of the musical text through procedures used by the accompanying instruments (imitation, simple arpeggios, holding of a note, or even through the variety brought by giving the violin a short solo passage). As for the cello, when it was used - especially in the case of German composers - its function was limited to doubling and strengthening the relatively weak notes of the harpsichord part.

Accompanied sonatas gained in popularity in their time partly because they were written for amateur musicians, offering them the opportunity to take joy in playing them without being disdained for their lack of ability. This social aspect is well demonstrated by the prefaces of different works. For example, Luigi Boccherini describes his collection Op. 7, from 1770, as "*Sei Conversazione a tre*". Charles Avison, in the preface to his sonatas for the harpsichord accompanied by two violins, writes the following: "This type of music is not, indeed, planned only for public, but also for private amusement. It is more than a mere conversation among friends; it is to give variety, and to bring happiness to their select company."

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Thus, a significant number of chamber works were initially written and structured in such a way as to be accessible to musical amateurs. Composers of the epoch such as Leopold Kozeluch, Johan Baptist Wanhall, Johann Franz Xavier Sterkel and Franz Anton Hoffmeister wrote numerous accompanied sonatas, works which were appreciated more for their technical simplicity and their melodiousness, than for their profound artistic characteristics. In a Viennese magazine, published in *Musikalische Real-Zeitung* in 1789, Sterkel's trios were praised because they "do not show excessive modulations toward distantly related keys, neither do they have difficult passages, just pleasant melodies."

Besides the works originally composed for trios with harpsichord, one encounters pieces for solo harpsichord with the optional addition of a violin, often added by the editor, or arrangements for trio of works written for other combinations of instruments. These transcriptions were cultivated from that time, and remained a common practice during the entire classical period. The development of the piano trio at this time was still far from the maturity and crystallisation of the classical piano trio. Changes yet to be seen include the elimination of the *basso continuo*, the particularisation of the voices, the individualisation of the cello, and the equalisation of the importance of the different instruments in the trio.

Moving on in the evolution of chamber music, a distinguished and important period, which connects the Baroque to Classicism, is the period of the School of Mannheim, a period which brings great changes in the genre of chamber music in the second half of the 18th century. As a first important feature, we must mention the tendency to abandon *basso continuo*, and to replace it with a melody of its own, although in religious music, the type of writing with *basso continuo* survived until the 19th century. But the Mannheim School brought many new elements in the world of instrumental chamber music: a less contrapuntal style; a two-themed sonata form with new tonal rules; the introduction of themes with a popular character; and the introduction of the Menuet as a middle part in tripartite sonatas. Thus, through the elimination of *basso continuo*, a new concept of chamber music appears in classicism, allowing the bass line to actively take part as an equal melodic factor in the ensemble, and attaining a new degree of individualisation for the cello.

Stylistic changes brought by classicism can also be seen in the instrumental combinations, as ensembles tend to become more uniform and homogeneous, and a predilection appears for the string quartet, but also for the trio, the quintet, the sextet, or even the octet.

A special group of instrumental combinations appears: the combining of stringed instruments with the piano gives birth to the piano trio, quartet and quintet. In the last quarter of the 18th century, a growing number of composers tried to approach the ideal of the piano trio, a few among them being Karl Friederich Abel, Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach, Carl Stamitz and Ignaz Joseph

Pleyel. Their works, although they belong more to the genre of accompanied sonata, began to include more and more independence in the roles of the string players; and the fortepiano is mentioned specifically, at least as a possible alternative to the harpsichord.

As the piano trio blossomed, the accompanied sonata declined. Examples of the genre, belonging to composers such as Adalbert Gyrowetz, Anton Reicha, and Joseph Wolff, continued to appear even until the second decade of the 19th century, although they did not succeed at occupying an important place in musical life. This reality is due, on the one hand, to the fact that they failed to keep up with modern ideas, but also to repertoire of doubtful quality. Curiously enough, the terminology associated with the form persisted for a long time, in contexts sometimes less than appropriate. One interesting example is Beethoven's Sonata for violin and piano, Op. 30, described in its first edition as a "sonata for piano with violin accompaniment."

It is worthwhile noting that until the appearance of the term "piano trio," this genre was called several different names by composers. Generally, in this era chamber music written for more than three instruments was still confused with the symphony. For example, during 1770, Haydn wrote trios, of the accompanied sonata type, for harpsichord violin and cello, calling them *divertimento*, in some cases, and *partita*, in others. In these works, and in others, the thematic material is not yet distributed equally among the instruments. Rather, the piano has the dominant role, with writing that tends toward brilliance and sparkle, full of original ideas, while the strings are limited to providing colour: the violin adds expressiveness to the melodic lines, and the cello sustains the bass, without contributing to the structure of the musical discourse. Only in the late trios does the violin begin to take a certain independence, occasionally having short solo passages or imitative counterpoint or bringing about unusually expressive and reflective moments. However, even in these works the cello fulfils only a supporting function, underscoring the bass line in the style of the older accompanied sonatas. Even so, the artistry of the composer, as seen in the pianistic writing and his inventiveness in the area of structure, exercised a significant influence on the evolution of the genre, as can be seen from the elements of his personal style which appear in numerous works of trio composers in the following generation.

As was true with the traditional accompanied sonatas, the piano trio in its early stages of development was intended mostly for the pleasure of amateur musicians in the homes of nobility, by contrast with the string quartet of the same era, which was usually intended for performance by professionals. In its more advanced stages, when the technical demands of the stringed instruments grew and piano construction advanced, the piano trio became a concert genre in its own right, alongside the string quartet, and was performed by professionals, often with the composer himself at the piano.

The Contribution of Joseph Haydn to the Crystallisation of the Genre

In spite of his position as principal founder of Viennese Classicism and father of modern instrumental music, an equal distribution of the elements of the sonata, among the three instruments, is still largely missing in the trios of Haydn. The composer does not succeed at freeing the string players, being dominated by his strong ties with the traditional accompanied sonata and the dominant style of keyboard instruments.

Although he attempts to bring the instruments to a more equal footing, in Haydn's works the cello still has a secondary role. Even so, he contributes to the perfecting of the form and establishes classical formal types specific to the genre. Haydn's merit in the process of equalising the roles held by the different instruments of a chamber music ensemble, appears greater in the 38 piano trios, the six violin-viola duos and, especially, in the 30 trios for diverse stringed instruments. The trios for two violins and cello maintain the connection with the past, as this ensemble is derived directly from that for which the older *a tre sonatas* were written, and which Haydn modernised, definitively eliminating the function of the harpsichord and providing the cello with an independent and complementary contribution in the musical discourse.

Through his manner of integrating the instruments into the tonal "fabric," by his way of coupling instruments and using their different registers, Joseph Haydn endowed his trios with a variety and richness of colour worthy of the artistry of a composer of the first importance. Some examples of such techniques include doubling a voice at the unison or in octaves; the occasional doubling of an interior melodic line, producing an unusual expressive warmth; the introduction of rests or of changes of register in the stringed instruments, thus contributing to the palette of colours used; the effective underscoring of the importance of melodic entries in the bass register by the cello. All of these procedures can be noticed in the the ingenious compositions belonging to the first representative of Viennese Classicism.

The Mozart Piano Trios: a Defining Moment in the Crystallisation of the Classic Piano Trio

The process, by which the accompanied sonata was transformed into the piano trio, and the establishing of the new model of this genre, are marked by the appearing of certain works by Mozart. As we follow the development of the accompanied sonata, we observe varied tendencies in the treatment of the three instruments of the ensemble. At the same time, we see that a series of innovations were necessary, even at the level of a new kind of collaboration among the instruments, in order for it to become obvious, in our time, that the trio evolved from the accompanied sonata.

In this direction, it can be said that Mozart's works represent a decisive stage in the crystallisation of the genre, manifesting a certain interpenetration of the sonata for violin and the trio for piano, violin and cello, both derived from the accompanied sonata for harpsichord.

An important moment was the consolidation of the sonata for piano and violin, in which Mozart establishes the balance between the two instruments, the violin becoming equal in importance with the piano. Thus, a new genre appears, manifesting a new formal structure of its own, as well as tendencies of thematic development and the combining of different elements as profile and expression in ways specific to it. As we follow the evolution of Mozart's sonatas for piano and violin, we clearly observe the ever-growing importance of the violin, from the first sonatas through to those written in his mature period, in which the violin dominates the musical discourse and the dialogue between the instruments becomes ever more tightly conceived, full of moments which surprise us by their melodic, harmonic and dynamic variety, arriving finally at a point in which the relationship between the two instruments seems to be reversed, the violin becoming more important than the piano. The process of crystallisation of the piano trio is certainly affected by this stage of the development of the sonata for piano and violin.

A third defining stage in the consolidation of the genre is the emancipation of the cello from its role in the *basso continuo* and, especially, the replacing of that role with one equal to that of the other instruments, through a new type of collaboration characterised by the intertwining and blending of the voices. This step brought with it the transformation of the cello from an optional instrument into an *obligato* instrument. In the first works in which Mozart succeeds in obtaining this function, the novelty consists in the melodic line which stands on its own, with a contour specific to the cello, and functions as a secondary theme.

Through these innovations, Mozart involves all the voices directly in the exposition and development of the thematic material, and this technique becomes a fundamental principle which will open up new perspectives in the structuring of the piano trio in the future: multiple thematic developments, or the passing of motives from one instrument to another, and the multiplication of tonal effects.

Translated by Kenneth Tucker

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