

# Notes on the Program

BY JAMES M. KELLER, PROGRAM ANNOTATOR

## Piano Trio in B-flat major, Op. 97, “Archduke”

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

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### Born

probably on December 16, 1770 (he was baptized on the 17th), in Bonn, then an independent electorate

### Died

March 26, 1827, in Vienna, Austria

### Work composed

1810–11, primarily March 3–26, 1811; apparently revised in 1814–15; it is dedicated to Archduke Rudolph

### World premiere

April 11, 1814, at noon, at Vienna’s Hotel Zum Romischen Kaiser, by Ignaz Schuppanzigh, violin; Joseph Linke, cello; and the composer at the piano. The following month the same performers played it at a morning concert in the Prater, an event that marked Beethoven’s last public appearance as a pianist.

### Estimated duration

ca. 40 minutes

First, the *Ghost* Trio, is the more famous), and the *Archduke* Trio, Op. 97. However, that is not the sum total of his music for piano trio, since he also published two sets of variations for that combination, in addition to which he created or authorized piano-trio versions of pieces originally written for other combinations: his Trio for Clarinet, Cello, and Piano (Op. 11) and his Septet (Op. 20, which in its trio version is identified as Op. 38). There is also a stand-alone *Allegretto* for Piano Trio in B-flat major (WoO 39) from 1812, which he wrote for the daughter of a family that he had befriended. Quite a few of Beethoven’s works appeared in piano-trio arrangements prepared by other composers, sometimes apparently with his approval. (Whether an 1804 transcription of Beethoven’s Second Symphony for piano trio was his own work or merely accomplished under his aegis remains unclear.)

The genre of the piano trio was very popular in Beethoven’s day, understandably so since it allows for making full-textured music with very few instruments — and, what’s more, by instruments that (at least at that time) were among the most widely studied. Not one to snub a commercial opportunity, the composer was perfectly willing to provide, or at least sanction, scores that would be of use to accomplished amateurs. Still, when it came to his full-scale piano trios, and certainly his last three, he made no concessions either to popular taste or less-than-professional ability.

The man with whom the last of Beethoven’s Piano Trios is identified was Archduke Rudolph (Rudolph Johann Joseph Rainer, to use all his given names),

Ludwig van Beethoven made some formative attempts in the medium of the piano trio even before he moved to Vienna in November 1792; in fact, his very first published collection — his Op. 1, printed in 1795 — was a set of three piano trios. He would go on to publish three more in the course of his career: the two Piano Trios, Op. 70 (of which the

## The Work at a Glance

The **opening theme** of the *Archduke* Trio is nothing if not aristocratic. It sets the tone for the entire work, which ultimately comes off as beneficent and often tender. Nearly all of the principal themes are first presented at a soft volume, usually with the admonition *dolce* appended. Of course, Beethoven develops his material exhaustively following those initial statements, frequently growing loud and sometimes gruff; even so, first impressions count for a lot.

In Classical four-movement structures, a slow movement usually comes second and a lighter minuet or scherzo third. However, Beethoven reverses the order here; this is a touch that he would repeat from time to time in his mid-career and later works. We therefore move from the elevated tone of the opening movement directly into the **Scherzo**, which comes across as jocular and even boisterous in comparison. The ensuing slow movement (**Andante cantabile**) is a theme with five variations that unroll leisurely in an atmosphere of pervasive calm. The hymn-like melody is transformed and decorated by ever-quickening rhythmic patterns as the variations unfurl: first in eighth-note triplets, then 16th notes, then 16th-note triplets, then 32nd notes. An expressive coda follows the variations, and this leads without a break to the finale (**Allegro moderato**). The mood transforms instantly from serenity to joviality in this rondo movement. Another touch: its principal theme begins with an ascending melodic pattern, just as did the opening movements.

the youngest son of Emperor Leopold II and brother of the then-current Emperor Franz. Ill health prevented his following the military career that was expected of him, and instead he took minor vows as a cleric and became an excellent pianist. Perhaps as early as the winter of 1803–04 he became a piano pupil of Beethoven's

(though it could be later; musicologists dispute this issue), and in 1808 Beethoven honored the nobleman by dedicating his Fourth Piano Concerto to him. It was the first of a dozen pieces so inscribed by the composer. The list of works dedicated to the archduke is mighty impressive: it includes the Fifth Piano Concerto as well as the Fourth, three piano sonatas (the *Les Adieux*, the *Hammerklavier*, and Op. 111), the G-major Violin Sonata (Op. 96), the *Missa solemnis*, and the *Grosse Fuge* – plus, of course, the *Archduke* Trio.

Archduke Rudolph continued to study piano and, later, music theory and composition with Beethoven at least through 1824. Beethoven was known to have complained that these lessons interfered with his own composing schedule, but he was careful not to voice such objections to the archduke directly – at least not in the many of his letters to Rudolph that have survived. It was wise of Beethoven to behave tactfully in this regard, since Rudolph was one of his staunchest patrons. He was one of the three aristocrats (along with Prince Kinsky and Prince Lobkowitz) who, in 1809, when Beethoven was considering a job offer from a brother of Napoleon's, drew up a contract that promised the composer a substantial annuity as long as he remained in Austrian lands. Of the three, Rudolph was the most punctilious in making sure his share of the payments arrived promptly.

The B-flat-major Piano Trio surely marks the summit of Beethoven's production for that medium, and it is among the towering masterpieces of his entire chamber-music output. It is a spacious work – Beethoven in his Apollonian mode – and its four movements (the last two being connected) typically run about 40 minutes in performance.

*Extracted from a note that originally appeared in the program books of the San Francisco Symphony, and used with permission.*  
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## Witness to the Creation

The *Archduke Trio* proved popular from the outset, notwithstanding the shortcomings of its premiere. *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, the classic Beethoven biography, quotes the testimony of the composer Louis Spohr who, it says, attended a rehearsal of the trio at Beethoven's home:

It was not a treat, for, in the first place, the piano was badly out of tune, which Beethoven minded little, since he did not hear it; and secondly, on account of his deafness there was scarcely anything left of the virtuosity of the artist which had formerly been so greatly admired. In *forte* passages the poor deaf man pounded on the keys till the strings jangled, and in *piano* he played so softly that whole groups of tones were omitted, so that the music was unintelligible unless one could look into the pianoforte part.



Blasius Höfel's 1814 stipple engraving after Louis Letronne's portrait of Beethoven

This anecdote has often been repeated in connection with this piece, but this is a good moment to point out that Spohr's *Autobiography*, the source of the quotation, reveals that the piece that he heard was what he identified as "a new Trio (D-Major, 3/4 time)" — which is to say the *Ghost Trio* (Op. 70, No. 1, composed in 1808 and therefore then still relatively new, certainly new to Spohr) rather than the *Archduke*. Still, Spohr's account of the state of Beethoven's pianism may be taken as generally accurate, and it is confirmed by an entry in the diary of the composer Ignaz Moscheles, who did attend the *Archduke Trio*'s premiere:

In the case of how many compositions is the word "new" misapplied! But never in Beethoven's, and least of all in this, which again is full of originality. His playing, aside from its intellectual element, satisfied me less, being wanting in clarity and precision; but I observed many traces of the *grand* style of playing which I had long recognized in his composition.



Beethoven's Graf piano, the last piano he possessed