

Mixed Trios with Piano

Bill Horne (2002)

I have been asked to write about some of the wonderful mixed wind, piano and string literature.

I have limited myself here to mixed trios with piano, for which there is a vast literature available, from the Baroque Trio Sonata to modern combinations. I will not discuss Trio Sonatas, as they are too numerous to cover. I shall limit this article to trios with winds and/or strings. This instrument alone probably has a preponderant amount of the works available for mixed groups. I hasten to add that this listing is by no means an exhaustive survey, just some friendly, choice selections. They are organized by instrument combination.

Clarinet, Cello, and Piano Trios

Without a doubt, the most famous and beautiful of the clarinet trios is the **Trio in A minor by Johannes Brahms, op. 114**. It is one of the several magnificent pieces written in 1890, after Brahms had told his publisher he had decided to quit composing. Then he met Richard Mühlfeld, a lyrical clarinetist for whom he wrote several pieces, including the famous Quintet, and two Sonatas. All four movements of the Trio are excellent, with that wistful, nostalgic lyricism so prevalent in late Brahms. It is the trio I recommend the highest.

Another famous composer wrote two excellent trios for this combination. The fourth Trio of **Ludwig van Beethoven, op. 11** is a delightful piece, and the **op. 38 Trio** is a version of the famous septet arranged for trio. Both are very rewarding to play.

A couple of trios that are a bit easier to play (at least for pianists), are the two **Concert-pieces by Felix Mendelssohn: #1 in f minor, op. 113**, and **#2 in d minor, op. 114**. Written originally for bass horn and bassoon, they are now usually played by clarinet and cello. Both are virtuosic pieces for the instruments, but the piano is chiefly only accompaniment. Another easier work is the **Trio-Miniaturen by Paul Juon**. Taken from various opuses, there are four movements combined in the edition by R. Lienhof. They are beautiful, not too difficult pieces.

The romantic era in music gave rise to a plethora of trios for this combination. One of the earliest is by **Mikhail Glinka** an early 19th century Russian composer. Again it was originally for clarinet and bassoon, but works well with cello, and I have heard a group play it with viola instead of cello. There are three post-Brahmsian, late-romantic era Trios, which are most interesting to play. The best, in my opinion, is the **Trio in g minor, op. 96, by Wilhelm Berger**. Another pleasant, enjoyable work is the **Trio opus 45 by Robert Kahn**, a Bavarian composer who lived into the 1930's. And finally there is the early **Trio, op. 3 by Alexander Zemlinsky**. This last work I find a bit overwrought and too chromatic for my taste.

The **Trio in Bb op 29, by Vincent d'Indy**, represents the French school. Written in 1886 as he turned from German music to French themes, he chose to replace the violin with a clarinet, as he played the clarinet. This piece uses the cyclic structure d'Indy copied from his teacher, Cesar Franck. This is a major work, often recorded, but I personally am not very fond of it, perhaps because it is so difficult to play.

The twentieth century is also well represented in this genre. There is a delightfully droll **Trio, op. 70**, in neo-classical style by **Gunther Raphael**. Another find is the **Fantasy Trio by Robert Muczynski**, an American composer. It is an exciting, well-written work with jazz elements. It reminds me a bit of Samuel Barber's style. A very unusual work is **Seven Balkan Dances by Marko Tajcevic** (Tai-CHEV-its) These feature exotic Balkan rhythms and modes in seven short movements.

Clarinet, Viola, and Piano Trios

Again there is a work for this combination, which stands far above all the rest. It is the famous **Trio in Eb major, "Kegelstatt" by Wolfgang Mozart**. Legend (probably false) says the nickname "Kegelstatt" derives from its composition while playing skittles with friends. It was written in 1785 when Mozart was experimenting with the new tonal qualities of the clarinet and viola. It is an exquisite piece of four movements, which flows from one beautiful motive to the next effortlessly. Like anything by Mozart, it is transparent, thus harder to play than it sounds.

What the next best piece for clarinet, viola and piano is may be debatable. I find the **Eight Pieces, op. 83 by Max Bruch**, to be charming pieces. He wrote them in 1909 for his son Felix, named after Mendelssohn. Bruch did not intend these pieces as an integral work; seven of the eight are in minor keys. But they are dark, juicy and lyrical.

Another wonderful, major work is the **Trio in A major, op. 264** by the late German romantic composer **Carl Reinecke**. It is tuneful, well-constructed, but has a rather busy piano part, which can be difficult to read. Reinecke, in my opinion, is an underrated composer. He was not an innovator, but a prolific tunesmith, and successful in his day.

Robert Schumann, that quintessential Romantic composer, also wrote for this combination his **Fairy Tales, op. 132**, written just three years before his death in 1856. Although sounding modern, the construction of these four movements is standard sonata form. The title implies a story without words, not actual fairy tales. By the way, another work by **Max Bruch, the Double Concerto, op. 88** for Clarinet and Viola, is published with a piano reduction, which makes a very playable trio too.

The twentieth century has produced at least three interesting works for this combination. My favorite is **Kleines Konzert, by Alfred Uhl**, an Austrian composer. Written in the late 1930's, it is an exciting, unusual piece, but I hasten to add, most difficult, especially for the piano. There are three movements, all outstanding. **Gordon Jacob**, a mid-century British giant of chamber music also weighs in with a Trio for this combination. Finally a recent but difficult work is the Trio by the ebullient French composer **Jean Francaix**.

Clarinet, Violin, and Piano

The combination of clarinet, violin, and piano did not seem to develop until the twentieth century. This curious fact is possibly because the two treble instruments are in similar ranges and are used for particular coloring more suggestive of oriental influences. Unfortunately most of these works are, like many modern pieces, daunting for the amateur to attempt. Rather than start with the greatest, I shall start with the slightly more accessible ones.

The **Suite for Violin, Clarinet and Piano by Darius Milhaud**, although difficult, is a tuneful work, easier to listen to as well as play.

My personal favorite however, is the **Trio by Aram Khachaturian**, the Armenian composer of the mid-20th century. It sounds very ethnic, exotic, and improvisational in parts. There are three movements, all sumptuous, but difficult upon first reading. I would almost recommend listening to recordings first.

I have recently discovered another Armenian Trio by **Alexander Arutiunian**, written in 1991 for the Verdehr Trio, a famous recording group in this combination. It has a similar Caucasian flavor, but is easier to put together. There is also a short work, **Largo for Violin, Clarinet, and Piano, by Charles Ives**.

There are two works that are both pinnacles of the repertoire for this combination, both fiendishly difficult. The first is **Contrasts** written in 1938 by **Bela Bartok**, commissioned by Benny Goodman and Josef Szigeti, to provide money for the newly immigrated, frail composer. There are three movements with Hungarian titles- a Recruiting dance, a Relaxing (desolate blues), and a Fast dance

Finally, there is **The Soldier's Tale (L'Histoire du Soldat) by Igor Stravinsky**. This work, written in Switzerland in the 1920's is a work for seven instruments and narrator, in its original form, but arranged as a suite of pieces for clarinet, violin, and piano. Unfortunately the piano seems to have gotten all the leftover parts of the other five instruments, and is wickedly erratic. This tale of a soldier who sells his soul to the devil, it is full of uneven, pulsating rhythmic variety, with devilish wailing from the clarinet and cajoling exorcisms on the violin. This piece, like the Bartok, will take effort to master, but it is well worth working on.

Flute, Cello, and Piano Trios

I will mention in passing three Trio Sonatas, just because I happen to have them: **Trio in G major, Hob. XV, 15 by Josef Haydn**; **Tríosone in D major by Jean-Marie Le Clair**, and **Pastorale, op. 13, #4 by Antonio Vivaldi**. All are beautiful.

One of the earliest romantic composers, **Carl Maria von Weber**, wrote a beautiful **Trio in g minor, op. 63, for flute, cello and piano** which I would recommend. Another delightful choice is the **Trio in e minor by Louise Farrenc**, the first woman on the faculty of the Paris Conservatory. She was married to a flutist and wrote this charming work, presumably for him. A final mention from this period is the **Trio Concertante, op. 256, by Carl Czerny**, however I find it a bit too virtuosic on the piano, and quite repetitious.

The twentieth century is very well represented in this grouping. The greatest work, in my opinion, is the **Trio (1950) for Flute, Cello and Piano by Bohuslav Martinu**. It has Martinu's characteristic driving rhythms, but a light, French flair to it. Next I would recommend a **Trio-Suite, op. 44 by Gunther Raphael**, written in his droll neo-classical style. There is a fine trio by **Norman Dello Joio**, an American composer. Less well-known are two French works, the **Sonata da Camera, op. 48, by Gabriel Pierne**, and **Trio by Marcelle de Manziarly** (1899-1986). I happened to find the latter, written in 1952, at the UC Berkeley Library. Both are charming works. Finally I also like **Lyric Trio** by contemporary American composer, **Katherine Hoover**, from the East Coast. Her music is modern, but melodic, and always interesting.

Flute, Viola, and Piano Trios

Regrettably there are only two works I am familiar with for this combination. Both are French, typical of the French preoccupation with interesting combinations and contrasting timbres. The best known piece is the **Sonata for Flute, Viola, and Harp, by Claude Debussy** (the harp part can be played on the piano.) It is a hauntingly beautiful work, but difficult to put together. Written in 1917, a year before his death from cancer, with which he already struggled, it is dedicated to his daughter. She was a joy to him in those trying days, but then died a year after him. There are three movements: Pastorale, Interlude, and Final. I do highly recommend it. Another excellent work is the **Prelude, Recitatif, et Variations, op. 3** by the French organist, **Maurice Duruflé**, composed in 1928.

Flute, Violin, and Piano

This is an interesting combination, with two treble instruments of different timbre. As noted above, there are myriad trio sonatas from the baroque period. The most notable, in my opinion, is **J.S. Bach's Triosonata in g minor, BWV 1020**. **Cesar Cui**, one the Russian Five late Romantic composers, wrote **Five Pieces, op. 56**, a very melodic easy work of this period.

Most of the works known to me in this combination stem from the 20th century. The most prolific and notable composer for this group is **Bohuslav Martinu**. He wrote three works: **Trio, Madrigal Trio, and Promenades** for flute, violin, and piano. The first two are difficult; I prefer the Trio. All are enjoyable. **Jacques Ibert**, the French composer, wrote two works, **Aria and Deux Interludes** which are quite accessible. And I particularly like the lyrical, melodic **Pastorale (1942) by Dutch composer, Hendrik Andriessen**. Finally there is another **Trio** written by **Otto Luening**.

Oboe, Viola, and Piano

There is one great work combining the perfumes of these two somewhat exotic instruments. It is the challenging, evocative **Two Rhapsodies** written by **Charles Martin Loeffler**. Written to two poems by Maurice Rollinat, the first is "The Pond," the second "The Bagpipe". This work is difficult for all three instruments, but a very descriptive tone poem of the content of the poetry. The **Sarabande & Rigaudon by Arthur Foote** can be played by oboe (or flute), viola, and piano.

Horn, Violin, and Piano

You have already read about the magnificent **Trio in Eb major, op. 40 by Johannes Brahms** in a previous newsletter article. It stands head and shoulders above any other work. I shall not review it again. However, there are other interesting works for this combination. The easiest and most melodic are **Quatre Petits Pieces by Charles Koechlin** and an arrangement of **Two Songs by Sergei Rachmaninoff**.

There is also **Trio, op. 11 by Swiss composer Werner Wehrli**, a late Romantic style piece. **Lennox Berkeley**, the prolific English composer, has written a fine work, **Trio for Violin, Horn and Piano**. The others are obscure, exceedingly difficult and dissonant. These include: **The Voice of the Coelocanth by William Bergsma**, **Twilight Music (1990) by John Harbison**, **Trio, op. 76 by Wilfred Josephs**, and **Dance-Movements by John McCabe**. I have recently read about an 18-minute-long recently composed Trio for this combination by the contemporary Armenian composer, **Alexander Arutiunian**. I find his work ethnic and interesting, and I will be looking for it.