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Trio con Brio Copenhagen review: Deeply felt music

Danish chamber music ensemble performs music born of emotional upheaval

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by **TERRY ROSS**

When he wrote his last trio, Robert Schumann (1810-1856) is thought by some to have already begun suffering from the incurable mental illness that ended his life prematurely at age 46.

But as performed by Trio con Brio Copenhagen last week to open their Friends of Chamber Music concert at Portland State University's Lincoln Hall, Schumann's *Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 110*, seemed not merely sane but coherent. Any evidence of the composer's condition may appear in the different treatment of the instruments in its four movements. In the first movement *Bewegt, doch nicht zu rasch* ("Agitated, but not too fast"), the violin, cello, and piano each seem to be playing to themselves, rather than combining in a group conversation. In the second movement *Ziemlich langsam* ("Rather slowly"), the stringed instruments, played by the Korean sisters Soo-Jin Hong (violin) and Soo-Kyung Hong (cello), play to and for each other, with mere support from the piano, except at the end, when pianist Jens Elvekjaer states the lovely main theme.



Trio con Brio Copenhagen performed at Portland State University. Photo: John Green.

Schumann's wife Clara admired the third-movement *Scherzo*, marked *Rasch* ("fast"), above the other three. At only four minutes, it is the shortest of the three and ends in even more agitation than the first. The final movement, *Kraftig, mit Humor* ("Powerfully, with humor") is the least appealing of the four, but in its quotations from the three preceding, it makes for a plausible conclusion.

The trio played Schumann's piece with restraint when the music called for it and with genuine vigor in the fast passages. Cellist Soo-Kyung seemed to be the focus of the other two most of the time, and she produced the most gorgeous sounds on her Grancino cello.

The first half also featured the Portland premiere of Jan Sandström's *Four Pieces for Piano Trio*, written in 2012 for this ensemble. Sandström, who was born in 1954, is by all accounts well represented on Scandinavian concert stages. Amongst his considerable oeuvre, the piece most consistently repeated is his *Motorbike Concerto (Trombone Concerto No. 1)*, composed in 1991.

Sandström's *Four Pieces* (three minutes each for the first three, six for the fourth) are not readily distinguishable from one another. The musical language in all four is identifiably contemporary but not atonal, a little like late Stravinsky crossed with Arvo Pärt. In a short introduction, pianist Elvekjaer described the composer as a "manipulative romantic." But Sandström seems not to have decided what he wanted to pursue — staccato passages, cantabile moments, or concerted statements. The music in all four movements jumped from one sort of thing to another without ever developing any of the ideas introduced.

Then, after the intermission, the high point of the concert in both the quality of the music and the playing of it. When Antonin Dvorak began his *Op. 65 Trio* early in 1883, the memory of his mother's death six weeks earlier was still fresh and painful. He responded with his most emotional music to date, although he already had six symphonies, eleven string quartets, and many other chamber works behind him. But this trio proved a sort of turning point in Dvorak's effort to become

a staple of the concert repertoire in Europe. His most fertile and mature period followed, the years of the *Seventh, Eighth and Ninth Symphonies*, the *Slavonic Dances*, and the final three string quartets, as well as a great deal of program music.

Amidst the stormy intensity of the first-movement *Allegro ma non troppo*, Dvorak finds space to introduce two rhapsodic duets for piano and cello. These were lovingly caressed by Mr. Elvekjaer and Ms. Soo-Kyung, who in “real life” met in the formation of the Trio con Brio and later married. In the second-movement *Allegretto grazioso* the pianist takes center stage, playing the melody at the beginning and end of the six-minute movement.

The third movement, marked *Poco adagio* (“a little slow”), is the heart of the piece, a beautiful rendition of the both the composer’s sorrow and fond memories concerning his mother. Violinist Soo-jin took the melody late in this movement, and her playing (on her lovely Guarneri instrument) was heart-wrenching. The fourth-movement *Finale Allegro con brio* returns to the intensity of the questing, agitated first, with a Slavic hint and an elegant waltz passage, the whole thing ending in an explosion of energy. The Trio con Brio were all over it, raising their six hands in triumph at the rousing finish.

As an added treat, they returned, after a couple of standing ovations, to play an encore: the lovely slow third movement of Dvorak’s G-minor *Trio* of 1876. You could have heard a hummingbird chirp at the end, before the audience exploded again in sustained applause.