

**Pre-concert talk to Musica Viva, Canberra, before the concert given by the  
Macquarie Trio, Monday 14 April 1997**

**by Don Aitkin**

This is only the second talk of any kind I have given at the time of a concert, so you will excuse a certain amount of trepidation on my part. You would be even more ready to excuse my anxiety if you knew that my first such talk was given 41 years ago, when I was president of the University student music society, and I thanked the members of the famous Amadeus Quartet after their little free lunchtime concert for the students with the remark that we had really got our money's worth!

I thought that I would build this talk around the subject of musical 'craftmanship' in its social and economic context, and then say something about the piano trio as a musical form, with some very brief comments about the three works that we are going to hear tonight. Of course, along the way I will talk about all sorts of other things, but I thought you should know right away what I was setting out to do.

**Craftmanship**

I thought craftmanship would make a useful linking theme because it enables us to consider the three composers from a common perspective other than that they all wrote piano trios or that they all lived for considerable periods of time in Vienna. Craftmanship is an attitude to work involving one's use of skill and art in a particular occupation; as a word it is linked to the German *Kraft*, meaning 'strength', and the strength of a craftsman is connected to his or her attitude to the use of skill and art, whose outcome at best is work of the highest quality of which that person is capable. And how that craft is exercised depends on the social and economic context in which the craftsman lives. In the case of music, how is the craftsman to earn a living? How secure is that living? Who uses the product? Who pays and how much, and for what? I don't have to tell you that Mozart, Beethoven and the other great composers would be wealthy people today simply through the sales of CDs, let alone from performing rights, every time their music was broadcast or played at a concert. But ours is a different social and economic context to theirs. Many composers of the 18th and 19th century did not hear some of the music which they had composed, whereas it is possible to hear today, for example, every single piece that Mozart ever composed, and there are up to 50 recorded versions of some of them. To understand something of the music we will hear tonight, it helps to know something about our composers' attitudes to work and to audiences, and something about the kind of world they lived in.

To start this discussion I want to consider an earlier pair of composers, J. S. Bach and Telemann, both of whom were in their teens in 1700. Telemann's family did not want him to become a musician because as an occupation it was neither respectable nor well-paid. He began, like many young talented Germans of his day, as a student in law, moving to music only later. In 1800, a century later,

Beethoven lived quite comfortably, essentially from his earnings as a composer and from gifts from admirers. Three generations later, in 1870, Brahms was wealthy in anyone's terms simply from his royalties as a composer from his publisher Simrock. He had other sources of income, too, all connected with his craft of music.

Bach and Telemann earned their living as professional musicians, sometimes working as a kind of musician-in-residence at a court or as the musical director of a church or as the musical director of a town or city. Their tasks covered composition, performance, the organisation of choirs and orchestras, teaching, rehearsing, administration — the lot. Their various tasks today represent quite separate occupations, even professions, although there are of course people today who still combine aspects of them. Each of them was an early exponent of the new-fangled public concert, sometimes privately organised, for which the growing educated middle class paid good money for tickets, just as we have done for tonight. Neither of them made much money at all from publication, because the notion of copyright and of the uniqueness of a composition was itself new. Effective copyright law was to be largely a creation of the 19th century, even though the first English law was passed in 1710.

One consequence of the setting in which the craft of music was practised at their time (essentially 1700-1750) was that their manuscripts were not thought by them or by anyone else at the time to be especially important. Manuscripts were to serve a particular purpose, and when that purpose had been accomplished, the manuscripts were put aside. A lot of the music known to have been written by both composers has been lost. So have 15 or so of Haydn's string quartets. You probably know that even in the late 18th century Mozart and Clementi and other travelling performers carried their scores with them, and collected the scores from the players at the end of the concerts. Another consequence was that there was a steady compulsion on Telemann and Bach, as on all composers of the 18th century, to produce something new. And when they died their music passed out of use at once. Only Handel and Haydn survived, as it were, in the music of the times after their deaths. Our practice of attending concerts to hear music written two centuries ago would have seemed bizarre to people in 1750. Why would we not want to listen to contemporaries, and to works produced especially for tonight? That is what they were familiar with. You can hear Ross Edwards, Colin Brumby and Carl Vine agreeing heartily.

Mozart wrote 27 piano concertos not just because he was good at them but simply because his audiences wanted to hear his new work, not his old. His craft was put to that use for a number of reasons. First, he was a celebrated performer at the keyboard; second, he was highly skilled in creating music for the piano and orchestra; third, by the 1780s there were good orchestras in the main cities (that hadn't been true a generation earlier); fourth, there was an aristocratic class interested in such music and able to patronise it, as well as a concert-going public able to pay (again, something much less true a generation earlier); fifth, there were entrepreneurs able to do all the organising work in getting a concert or a concert series going; and sixth, there were newspapers and

other forms of advertising which aided the success of such ventures. So Mozart's 27 piano concertos, in their abundance, and to a degree in their quality, represent the way in which that craftsman employed his talents in the context of what was possible for him to earn a living.

The 18th century is extraordinarily important in the development of music, especially the second half of that century, because it is the beginning of the industrial revolution — aspects of which I have just mentioned. After 1750, to pluck a year that will stand for the beginning, the social and economic context of music-making changed rapidly. So what were the characteristics of the craft of music just before the change occurred? Well, as I have already observed, an important one was being across all aspects of the trade: Bach was very well known as a tester of organs as well as an organist. Leading musicians took seriously the notion of apprenticeship, training people, writing music for people who were in training, borrowing musical ideas from other people and from their own earlier work, working quickly and well, repeating successes (what we would today somewhat disparagingly call 'potboilers'). They learned to be decently proficient on a number of instruments (Bach, like Mozart, Schubert, Beethoven and Brahms in later times, all of them good pianists, to say the least, played the viola well enough to perform with accomplished violinists and cellists). Bach and Telemann worked inside a well-developed tradition, extending it, to be sure, but within its main stream. In their large-scale work there is a kind of democracy of work — all players have real music to play, not simply little bits and pieces put in to provide a certain effect or colour, as was to become common a century later. (I owe this thought to R. W. Connell's thought-provoking essay on Bach's music.)

### *Joseph Haydn*

Now Joseph Haydn, the first of tonight's composers, was long-lived (1732 - 1809), and his working career took in the whole of the second half of the 18th century. When Bach died in 1751 Haydn was 19, and he was therefore 24 when Mozart was born five years later. When he himself died in 1808 Mozart had been dead for 17 years and Beethoven was already 38. As you probably know, much of Haydn's work was produced for the musical life of the Esterhazy family, Magyar nobles whose castle was so magnificent that it was called the 'Versailles of Hungary'. It was only when Prince Miklos Esterhazy died in 1790 and his successor did not wish to keep up the Esterhazy musical establishment that Haydn became a freelance composer, so to speak. The piano trio we will hear tonight comes from this later period. The Esterhazys had a fine orchestra, were musical as a family, and expected good new music from Haydn just as they expected good new dinners from their cook. Haydn's musical duties were almost universal. Prince Miklos encouraged Haydn to have a wide range, but he expected output. So Haydn's production, even today, seems almost staggering: 104 symphonies, 83 string quartets, scores of other works, including 30 or so piano trios, masses, oratorios. He seems to have been a cheery sort of man, and because the fashion was to wear perukes, or wigs, but otherwise to be clean-shaven, his face, unlike that of Brahms, who is always bearded in the portraits I have seen, is available to us. His is a good Canberra sort of face, plainly the sort

of person who today would be a senior public servant — there's a bit of Sir Humphrey in the Thomas Hardy portrait, which is the well-known one. His musicians liked him because he looked after them. I'm sure we would have liked him too.

So that is Franz Joseph Haydn, who died internationally famous, venerated in his adopted city, Vienna, and decently wealthy. He exemplified two kinds of craftsmanship — first the traditional patron-supported, multi-skilled, hard-working, universal musician exemplified two generations before him by Bach and Telemann. Then, in his later period, he became the travelling composer/conductor with his new symphonies for London, his piano trios published for the market, his oratorios for the Viennese public, the variety in output reflecting the greater ease of travel, the wider reach of music, the growing playing competence of professionals and public alike, that was characteristic of the beginning of the new century.

### *Franz Schubert*

So to Franz Peter Schubert, born just at the end of the old century in 1797, when Haydn was 65, and dying a couple of months short of his 32nd birthday. The likenesses of him show a young, rather plump man with dark curly hair and full lips. If there is a Canberra equivalent, he'll most likely be found at one of the universities as a postdoc. He was the son of a schoolteacher just outside Vienna, grew up in a family which played string quartets (Franz, as I said, played the viola), won a scholarship to the imperial court chapel choir, got a good musical education, developed into a decent pianist, and produced a lot of his own composition while in his teens — including five string quartets, three symphonies and three large masses. In his 17th and 18th years he wrote more than 170 songs. The music just flowed out of him. But there was no good paid occupation in music available for him, and he went to teachers college, avoided military service because he was too short and finished up as an assistant in his father's school. He hated it, and tried again and again to leave teaching, succeeding when he was 21. He briefly served as the music master to the two daughters of another of the Esterhazy family.

A lot of his best music had been written already, but there was no money in it. It wasn't until he was 24 that he made any money out of his songs, and then only because some friends offered his 'Erlking' on a subscription basis. He had some good friends, there were concerts of his music, called 'Schubertiads', at the houses of friends — he was looked after. But he disliked the dependence on others, was usually penniless, and frequently dejected and depressed. He was not able to buy himself a piano until the last year of his life, when his fame was great enough to make a single concert (the only public concert he gave) a financial as well as an artistic success. At length his songs became so well-known that publishers sought to publish them, and he earned some money that way and from teaching. He tried once to gain a court post in Vienna, as deputy Kapellmeister, but was unsuccessful.

There is no doubt that Schubert was unlucky, and not simply in dying young. He seems not to have had the self-confidence of Beethoven (who got much better deals out of publishers than Schubert did), and he may well have been badly placed in his time, for the most part missing out on aristocratic sponsors (they were now passing from the scene) and a little too early to pick up the possibilities that were to come through concerts, widespread publication and rapid tours (the advent of the railway and the steamship had a great effect on the capacity of performer/composers to make money). Had he survived into his sixties or seventies, like Haydn, it is hard to doubt that he would have been successful and decently wealthy. He was certainly in the right city, and his musical style was pre-Romantic, anticipating what was to come.

The world's gain, if that is what we should call it, is that his lack of a job with particular responsibilities allowed him to write what he wanted to write — lots of operas which weren't generally popular and are not played much even now, wonderful chamber music, hundreds of songs (he was an intuitive songwriter who would have been fabulously wealthy had he emerged in the 1920s), much great piano music and a few fine symphonies. To read about him is to encounter someone familiar in our own time, a young person with great talents who is not quite sure that he is as good as he would like to be, and doesn't know how to sell himself and his talents to those who matter. Such people are mercurial in their temper, now excited and sanguine, tomorrow gloomy and down. It's hard not to like them, but it's often difficult to know what to do for them.

### *Johannes Brahms*

Finally, then, we come to the craft of Johannes Brahms, born 24 years after the death of Haydn and five years after the death of Schubert. He was the son of a horn and double-bass player, and showed early promise as a pianist. He helped the family income by playing in pubs, giving recitals and teaching. If Schubert was unlucky, Brahms was lucky: early in his career, when he was 20, he met the violinist Joachim, who introduced him to Schumann, the editor of an important music magazine as well as a leading composer, and Schumann told the world that a musical genius had arrived. After that things really happened for him. He got jobs directing choirs, settled in Vienna, became a conductor, first for the Gesellschaft für Musikfreunde, which I mention because that was the organisation in which Schubert's Piano Trio which we will hear tonight was first performed. The musical world is a small place. Later, Brahms was for three seasons the conductor of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. Throughout he continued to compose. He wrote lots of songs, and because he had been a choral conductor, a lot of choral music. Some of his piano works, like the 'Hungarian Dances', were sensationally popular and, copyright now being firmly established, he became wealthy just from composition. It wasn't just copyright; by this time the piano had become industrialised, and hundreds of thousands of them had been produced. Every middle-class family, and many working-class families (at least in Australia) had them, people made sure that their children took piano lessons, and there was a great market for sheet music.

Brahms's life seems to have had an even tenor. He had friends, he lived simply despite his income, he kept studying music as well as composing it, and lived a full musical life. He was a modest man, who found the pre-eminence of Beethoven a fearful challenge to his own talent; he destroyed lots of early pieces and early drafts. But there seems to be a pleasantness of temperament and a sense of self-worth in the portraits. He looks prosperous and whiskered — no Canberra location seems to fit him, unless it is the Kingston bus-depot market. His whiskers, however, are better cared for than most of those we see today.

### The Piano Trio

The piano trio and the piano quartet and quintet all present composers with a problem, which you can sense if you think quickly in comparison of the string trio or quartet. Two violins, a viola and a cello work together very well — the instruments make music the same way, have similar capacities and appeal to the ear in much the same way. But the piano is essentially an instrument of percussion; it does things differently and can overpower the strings, refuse to blend with them, and make combination difficult.

The piano trio is a creation of the 18th century (Beethoven's Op.1 was a set of three piano trios) and it fell out of favour during the 19th, along with chamber music generally. Those with conservative musical tastes, like Brahms, Mendelssohn and Schumann, continued to write them, though in much diminished number compared with Haydn. The form began as a kind of accompanied piano sonata — indeed Haydn, in offering a set of piano trios to his publishers Artaria in 1788, referred to them as 'piano sonatas with the accompaniment of a violin and violoncello'. And most of Haydn's 30+ piano trios have the piano firmly in control, with the cello often doubling the pianist's left hand and the violin focussing on the pianist's right hand. Yet the writing for piano in the trios has pushed Andras Schiff to describe the Haydn piano trios as 'the greatest piano works of the 18th century before Beethoven', which is no small praise. Tonight we hear Haydn's 28th, written in 1796 (a year after Beethoven's Op.1 set). It has been a favourite composition with me for 30 years, and to me typifies Haydn's melodious, good-humoured approach to music and to life.

Schubert wrote only two full-scale piano trios, and the one we are to hear tonight was completed only a year before he died. Both of them are fine works, even masterpieces. But you should know that Schubert placed a high value on 'togetherness', and these pieces were intended for friends playing together. The public performances of Schubert's music in the houses of friends were not wholly serious occasions — they were entertainments, and the music was varied and on the domestic side, songs, duets, piano pieces, trios and quartets. One of the guests wrote in his diary about one such Schubertiad evening, held at the house of Schubert's steady friend Josef von Spaun, like this:

With Enk, Louis and Jerome to Spaun's, where glorious music was made by Schuppanzigh, Bocklet, Lincke, Schubert and Gahy. The Prelate of [St] Florian and the two Maiers, the Ottenwalts, Spaun's very nice betrothed, etc.,

were there, altogether 50 people. We nearly all got tipsy. We danced, I a great deal with Frau von Ottenwalt.

The other piano trio was very probably played on that night, which sounds to have been great fun. This one, the Piano Trio in E Flat, is a long work, with outside movements about twice as long as the inside movements. It is also somewhat less cheerful and ebullient than much of Schubert's music, which has caused commentators to suggest that Schubert was aware of his coming death. I never know what to make of comments like these, and wonder whether Schubert was indeed aware of his coming death, and how he could have been sure, since he died of typhoid fever after having drunk tainted water. He was certainly worried about money, as he was for most of his adult life. Whatever his state of mind in 1827, the result is beautiful music. When I came to it again, in preparation for tonight, I remembered that I had first heard this piece, too, a long time ago, and how good it was. Schubert deals with the balance problem by giving each player a period of dominance, and keeping the piano quiet when it is doing the accompanying. The cello has some lovely moments.

Brahms wrote only three piano trios, one as a young man (his Op.8, when 21) and the later two in mid-life. The one we hear tonight was written when he was 49, and it had taken a couple of years to complete. For me it is a characteristic work of Brahms, for every now and then I hear a theme or a development which sounds as though it could with ease be turned into another Brahms piano concerto. Brahms sometimes seems a touch too 'serious' to me — perhaps that is what I meant a moment ago. But it is hard not to admire the way in which he puts it all together. You will notice that all three players have important roles — the piano is no longer the master, and Brahms, more successfully than the other two, in my opinion, overcomes the potential for clash between piano and strings. He does it by doubling the violin and cello, so that they play the same sequences of notes, and can match the piano for volume. The outcome seems to me to more powerful even than doubling, but that may just be a trick of my imagination.

Well, it is time to go and hear the Macquarie Trio. I hope you have found my talk interesting, and that it has provided a useful introduction to the music tonight. I thank you for your attention.