

About the Music.

by Annie Jacobs-Perkins

Conrad Tao: *Eventide*

Eventide is my opus one, the earliest piece of mine that I still claim. I composed it on a spring afternoon in 2009. I was trying to write a piece about love, desire settling into something more subdued yet still crackling with urgency. Over a shifting, humming bed of piano textures, violin and cello sing soaring melodies, sometimes in unison, sometimes nearly missing one another.

Eventide was written for and premiered in Chicago by the Lincoln Trio: Marta Aznavoorian on piano, David Cunliffe on cello, and my violin teacher from ages five to nine, Desiree Ruhstrat.

— Conrad Tao

Conrad Tao began playing the piano when he was very, very young — he was only eighteen months old when he touched a piano for the first time and four years old when he started learning in earnest. He started touring a few years later, and composing followed as a natural step not so long after that; Tao wrote *Eventide* when he was just fifteen. Music has been a part of Tao's life since he began to talk, and in a radio interview from 2019, he spoke about how this has changed his approach to composition. For him, music is all about “social textures”: it is a tool, just as language is, to connect “swaths and swaths of people.”

The fact that music has been so naturally inseparable from Tao's own

life has given him a sense of freedom rather than trapping him into one way of making music. He says, “I've always kind of done my own thing... Still to this day, I feel like what I'm trying to communicate and embody is: Come as you are. It demands that you actually bring yourself into the work, and it demands that you explore a certain kind of freedom onstage.”

Eventide begins with a raindrop-like texture in the piano, almost reminiscent of Brahms' Op. 119, No. 1, though in Tao's piece the texture takes on something reminiscent of starlight. The violin enters first alone and the cello joins later; one thing to listen for throughout the piece is how the strings weave around one another, sometimes alone, sometimes playing in unison, and at other times seamlessly becoming a part of the texture of the piano. In this first section, all three voices stay suspended in higher registers.

In the middle of the piece, the piano begins the suggestion of a dance with lifting open fifths starting in the bass. Though no true dance properly begins here, the lilting quality hints that a dance is just around the corner, and it eventually does arrive when the piano begins trance-like triplets. As before, the piano controls the texture, changing the perception of the melodies that the strings play over the top. Finally, the beginning texture and melody in the violin returns, this time a third lower.

Maurice Ravel: Piano Trio

Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?

— Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe and Maurice Ravel do not at first glance seem like they share much in common. Poe, however, was one of Ravel's literary idols — and the two shared an obsession with defining exactly what makes a soul susceptible to a particular emotion at any given moment. They were both masters of control; a large part of their creativity comes from an almost spiritual reverence for manipulating form and structure.

Ravel thought about writing a piano trio for six years. When he finally started in 1914, he wrote to his friend Maurice Delage, "I've written my trio. Now all I need are the themes." He continued revising the trio into 1915 as World War I was breaking out across Europe.

Ravel was born in 1875 in the French Basque seaside village of Ciboure, only eighteen kilometers from the Spanish border. Though his mother was a native French speaker from the Basque region, she grew up in Madrid and sang her son the Spanish folk songs she learned as a child. Spain is where Ravel's mother met his father, a Swiss inventor and engineer. The Ravel family moved to Paris only three months after Maurice was born, but these two influences appear in

his piano trio; one can hear what Stravinsky referred to as Ravel's "Swiss clockmaker" side in the tightly controlled form of this work, while the use of Basque folk songs and dances shows the influence of his heritage.

The first movement of the trio comes from the Basque *zortzico*. Traditionally in 5/8 meter, the *zortzico* is both a song and a dance. Ravel was preoccupied with Basque folk music: around the same time, he was stuck writing a piano concerto that he could not finish called *Zaspiaq Bat* ("The Seven Provinces"), all the movements of which were based on traditional Basque music. Another way that the *zortzico* manifests in the trio is in its period form. Typically, each period of a *zortzico* repeats eight times so that the unstable and asymmetrical 5/8 rhythm is predictable for the dancers.

Ravel carries this attention to poetry into the second movement, *Pantoum*. A *pantoum* is a poem in which the second and fourth lines of the previous four-line stanza become the first and third in the new. A form originating from Indonesia and Malaysia, the *pantoum* was a popular source of inspiration for other French artists including Baudelaire, Hugo, and Gautier. Another requirement of the form is that two ideas must concurrently evolve. Ravel recognized this as being particularly suited to a piano trio, in which the piano and strings naturally have different textures and strengths. He introduces these two ideas within the first two bars, one spiky and scherzo-like, the

other built on sweeping, wavelike gestures. It is interesting to note that while writing his piano trio, Ravel was helping to prepare a modern edition of Mendelssohn's piano pieces for Durand, whose publishing office was within walking distance of his military station in Paris. One imagines that the fleetness of the piano writing in the trio, especially in *Pantoum*, could owe something to Mendelssohn.

The *Pasacaille* of the third movement looks back to Ravel's love of Renaissance music, and perhaps to the influence of his teacher Gabriel Fauré, who also held great respect for the music of past masters. The sparseness and beauty of line makes one think that Ravel took a similar process to that which he applied in the composition of *Le Tombeau de Couperin*: Ravel proclaimed that it took him one year to write the piece and a further three years to remove all of the unnecessary notes.

When Ravel wrote the finale, war was beginning in Europe. With cyclical references to the first movement, Ravel alternates between asymmetrical rhythms, and the sound of trumpet calls in the piano echoes the sound of a call to war.

**Robert Schumann:
Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 63**

June 8, 1847: My 37th birthday, happy with Clara – thoughts of trio – ate at Findiaters

June 9: First movement of Trio (d minor) almost finished – in the evening a soiree at Hiller's in honor of the Auerbachs – R. Wagner

June 11: ...Trio joy...

June 12: ...Trio joy...

June 13: ...in the last movement of trio with joy...

June 14: ...joy like yesterday...

June 15: ...like yesterday...

June 16: ...The trio is finished – joy...

*– Diary of Robert &
Clara Schumann,
Haushaltsbuch 1847*

Robert Schumann finished sketching his First Piano Trio in eight days. For a man whose romantic reputation often means he is remembered for the times he was sickest and hurting most, he seems also to have known the relief of joy – perhaps because he knew its opposite so well, in a way few adults do. In his music, even if it is fleeting, that joy is complete, unbridled, obsessive, and free.

After writing this initial sketch he returned to two ongoing projects: his Second Symphony and the *Faust Scenes*. He returned to the trio shortly after completing these other projects, finished it on September 7, and gifted it to Clara for her twenty-eighth

birthday on September 13. The two of them had a history of gifting piano trios to one another; just two years earlier, Clara had given Robert her Piano Trio for their seventh wedding anniversary.

One can hear the theatrical aspects of the *Faust Scenes* in the first movement of the Op. 63 Trio. It begins with a storm created by rumbling sforzandos and swells. The second theme introduces some sunshine with its ascending canons and the piano's syncopation, always gently nudging the players forward. One of the most touching moments of this movement comes in the development, where Schumann not only introduces a new theme, but does it with the strings *pianissimo in ponticello* (played up on the bridge for a glassy sound) and the piano mirroring them with heavenly triplets.

The outer sections of the second movement are a playful dance built around an ascending scale. The trio section, built in canon between the three instruments, is mellifluous and liquid; it speaks to Schumann's compositional craft that, despite its vastly different mood, it too is built around a rising and falling scale.

The third movement, marked *Mit Inniger Empfindung* ("with deep, inward feeling"), begins with a lonely violin and a sepulchral, fateful piano. Though Schumann may have written about the joy he felt while writing the trio, this was generally a time for him of "gloomy moods." It is hard to

imagine music any bleaker than this beginning. As the cello comes in, there is slightly more hope, but if you listen carefully, you will hear that the violin's lonely soliloquy has passed to the left hand of the piano. The *Etwas Bewegter* ("somewhat more animated") middle section is so hopeful, it almost feels a shame that the movement then ends as it begins, as if the main character has woken up from a beautiful dream and returned to reality.

The third movement never really closes. Instead it leads directly into the fourth movement — and this is where one encounters Schumann's fully unbridled joy. The beginning of this movement is such a relief after the tension of the third; it seems to be saying, "everything is going to be all right."

A wonderful quotation about his artistry comes from the German composer Wolfgang Rihm, who wrote:

...there is a composer whose musical thought was already perceived by his contemporaries as anarchic, and whose musical speech moves so freely, that to me, it appears the ideal case and embodiment of fantasy itself, which was able to flow from within to the outside world without strangulation; this composer is Robert Schumann.