



# Celebrity Series of Boston

Wednesday, February 21, 2018 at 8pm  
Symphony Hall

Emanuel Ax piano  
Leonidas Kavakos violin  
Yo-Yo Ma cello

## Notes on the Program

**Johannes Brahms** (1833-1897)  
*Trio No. 2 in C Major, Opus 87* (1880-82)

The first work of chamber music that Brahms issued publicly was his Piano Trio No. 1, composed as a 20-year-old after his pivotal introduction to Robert and Clara Schumann—both of whom had composed groundbreaking trios already. Twenty-six years later, Brahms returned to the format of trio for piano, violin, and cello, starting two different drafts that he shared with his old friend Clara. He ended up scrapping one and waiting another two years to finish the other, which he published and debuted in 1882.

The Piano Trio No. 2 in C major is remarkably focused and sparing in its use of musical material, much like the mature “middle period” works from Brahms’ ultimate idol, Beethoven. The violin and cello often work in tandem, either spaced out in octaves (starting with the naked opening passage) or moving together in clean harmony. The piano part is similarly stripped down, as in the accompanying octave gestures that place two-beat groupings against the three-beat pulse.

The *Andante con moto* maintains the distilled approach of the first movement, with the strings again moving together in octaves while the piano counters with a simple but rhythmically contradictory accompaniment. This movement takes one of the most economical approaches of all the standard forms, rehashing the initial theme in variations that each seize upon a core gesture with Beethovenian obsession. Midway through the movement, the most aggressive variation, with its pounding chords and staccato declarations, gives way to the most tender, reframed in the parallel major key.

Coming out of a slow movement in A minor, the Scherzo stays in dark territory by striking up the key of C minor. (For a work set in the ostensibly sunny key of C major, this trio is not shy about indulging in moody harmonies.) The *Presto* tempo and delicate texture—with the piano instructed to play “always very softly and lightly”—recalls Mendelssohn’s lighter-than-air scherzos. The contrasting trio section rhapsodizes on a C-major melody in a more comfortable tempo; when Brahms sent a draft to Clara Schumann, she commented that this music seemed “not important enough” and “lacking in charm” after the “entrancing” and “delightfully varied” scherzo. Brahms disagreed and kept the passage anyway.

The Finale once again begins with the strings in octaves and the piano playing an elemental accompaniment. Before we’ve even left the first measure an unsettled diminished-seventh chord disturbs the home key of C major, and that sound returns many times to hold suspense until the end.

## **Brahms**

### ***Trio No. 3 in C minor, Opus 101* (1886)**

“You can’t have any idea what it’s like always to hear such a giant marching behind you!” So Brahms once wrote about Beethoven, whose towering legacy scared Brahms off from releasing any string quartets or symphonies until he was in his forties. More than any other composer, it was Beethoven who provided the template for Brahms as his style became increasingly clear and focused. Arguably no work goes further in this direction than the Third Piano Trio from 1886, lasting a scant 21 minutes, and set in the same key of C minor that Beethoven used for his most fateful music.

The first movement, marked “Fast and energetic,” begins at full intensity. The dotted rhythms create an aggressive, martial attitude, while the contrasting theme is introduced in skeletal octaves that strip away any sentimentality. Without the usual repeat of the exposition and with the remaining sections of the sonata-allegro form compressed, this opening movement is all muscle and no fat.

In the second movement, muted strings and leaping plucks impart a hushed, ghostly tone. Again the textures and harmonies are left as transparent as possible, with clean octaves and sparse triads preferred over thick chords. Through much of the *Andante grazioso* slow movement, duet phrases for violin and cello alternate with piano responses; except for a few sparing moments and an enunciated final chord, the instruments maintain this austere separation. Building on the rhythmic syncopations and irregular meters that enlivened the preceding movement, the finale constructs devious patterns to give its initial theme a jolting momentum. The coda arrives triumphantly in C major, completing the same journey from dark to light as Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

## **Brahms**

### ***Trio No. 1 in B Major, Opus 8* (1853-54, rev. 1889)**

When the 20-year-old Brahms composed his Piano Trio No. 1, he was practicing an art form rooted more in the past than in the present. His early work looked to the examples of his dear friends and mentors, Robert and Clara Schumann, who each wrote important trios for piano, violin, and cello. Beyond those immediate precedents, Brahms honored the lineage that stretched from Haydn and Mozart, through Beethoven and Schubert, and on to Mendelssohn, a good friend to the Schumanns and a strong influence on their chamber music sensibilities.

Brahms decided to revisit his First Piano Trio 45 years later, although he still had enough regard for his first version that he allowed it to stay in print. The revised version of 1889 substituted in several new themes, tightened certain structures, and generally aligned the score with Brahms’ mature, lucid voice; writing to his old friend Clara, Brahms conceded, “It will not be so wild as it was before.” He kept the exceptionally warm and amorous melody that begins the *Allegro con brio* first movement, but he paired it with a new contrasting theme, its coy intervals and dry rhythms countering the songlike extroversion of the first theme.

The frisky Scherzo that comes next has a distinct Mendelssohn flavor to it, which Brahms left fully intact during the revision. The central trio section separates the outer passages, cast in B minor, with the bright contrast of B major. In the *Adagio* that follows, the same radiant key returns for the placid, hymn-like entrance. The central conflict between B minor and B major continues to play out in the finale, which retains the somewhat “wild” plan of Brahms’ original version by concluding with a turbulent burst of B minor.