

**RONEN CHAMBER ENSEMBLE**  
**Program Notes for March 8, 2005**

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*notes by Cathleen Partlow Strauss*

**Gordon Jacob (1895-1984): Trio for Clarinet, Viola and Piano (1969)**

Gordon Jacob is part of the generation of British composers that includes Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland, Herbert Howells, and Arnold Bax – the so-called English impressionists. The youngest of ten siblings, he enlisted in the Field Artillery to serve in World War I when he was 19, and was taken POW in 1917, one of only 60 men in his battalion of 800 to survive. After serving in the military, he studied with Charles Villiers Stanford at the Royal College of Music; however, there is very little resemblance between his music and that of the composers listed above. He rejected the overt Romanticism of his elders, writing more conservatively. His simple and sparse composing style was inspired partly by Baroque and Classical models. Highly prolific as a composer, he published over 700 pieces of music. Jacob had a special affinity for wind instruments, championing the wind band. He composed a large body of concerti and chamber music, including this Trio for Clarinet, Viola and Piano written in 1969. He was also a widely published writer of instructional books and essays on music. During the avant-garde period in the 1960s his work fell out of favor and he is quoted, "I personally feel repelled by the intellectual snobbery of some progressive artists... the day that melody is discarded altogether, you may as well pack up music..."

The 1969 Trio is melodic and quite rhythmically active. It is unusually structured with thematic and harmonic interlinks between the movements. The two slow movements (1 & 3) are in a plodding, somber character. Open fifths are the basis of the Menuetto's Trio section and the third movement Adagio. The last movement, a quotation from the third movement appears. Jacob's genius in color and texture are evident here, notable in several duets between the clarinet and viola.

**Luigi Bassi (1832-1871): Fantasia on Themes from Verdi's *Rigoletto* (1885)**

This melodious and challenging work is a showpiece characteristic of the nineteenth century. Composer-virtuosos such as Paganini and Liszt toured all over Europe in the nineteenth century playing works to demonstrate their instrumental prowess. The kind of super-stardom they enjoyed was usually reserved for pianists and violinists. However, there were wind virtuosos who achieved a certain amount of popularity. Luigi Bassi was one of these musicians. Principal clarinetist of La Scala, the famous opera house in Milan, Italy, he drew great inspiration for his own compositions from the Italian operas he played. The works he wrote certainly garnered attention for their popular appeal as well. The *Fantasia* programmed tonight is based on the opera *Rigoletto* by Giuseppe Verdi. *Rigoletto* remains at the core of the opera repertory today with its most famous aria "La donna è mobile." Bassi's work, which begins with a simply stated aria and is then elaborated with variations, is a great vehicle for a clarinetist to show off his or her technique. The extremely fast passages also require very tight coordination between the pianist and the clarinetist.

**Robert Schumann (1810-1856): Piano Trio No 1 in D minor, Op. 63**

Schumann composed most of his large chamber works, including the most enduring Piano Quintet, Op. 44, in 1842. Schumann wrote that Mendelssohn's D minor Trio, Op. 49, written in 1839 was "the master-trio of the age" and "the most brilliant trio of the present day – it will still give pleasure to our grandchildren and great-grandchildren." In 1847, possibly spurred on by Mendelssohn's example, the first of Schumann's 'official' piano trios (Op. 63) appeared. It shares the same key of D minor with the Mendelssohn, and its opening movement has a similarly turbulent atmosphere.

Schumann wrote two piano trios, Opp. 63 and 80, in rapid succession during the summer and autumn of 1847. In addition to Mendelssohn's influence, Schumann's wife Clara had recently completed her Piano Trio in G minor. They had also recently engaged in intense contrapuntal studies. Schumann's work resulted in

Four Fugues for Piano, Op. 72, Six Organ Fugues on the theme B-A-C-H, and the Canonic Studies for Pedal-Piano, Op. 58. It's evident that this activity left its mark on the two piano trios.

Schumann's indication for the first movement is marked "With energy and passion". An irregular seven-bar melody opens with the violin in the lowest register and a swirling piano part. Schumann immediately brings his contrapuntal art into play. The opening notes of the violin are accompanied in the bass of the piano by what will be the melody's second bar. It is pure genius to convey this subdued drama through academically wrought counterpoint. In fact, throughout the movement the music's breathless agitation is conveyed by its extreme compression. A lyrical and chromatic second theme is played out in canon, with the first theme used as a counter-subject in the cello. Counter-balancing the compression of the opening of the movement, Schumann treats the development broadly. This expansion is achieved by an extraordinary moment of stasis which introduces not only a new theme, but also a striking sonority. The violin and cello, both playing ponticello (near the bridge of the instrument), produce a striking, glassy sound while the piano plays shimmering chords at the top of the keyboard colored by use of the soft pedal. The new theme dominates the remainder of the development, and is alluded to again during the coda.

The scherzo-like second movement demonstrates Schumann's gifted ability to unify contrasting moods. Both the driving dotted rhythm of the scherzo's main motif and the smoothly sculpted theme of the trio emanate from the same melodic material. The trio's theme offers another example of Schumann's focus on counterpoint using canonic writing.

Schumann admitted that the D minor Trio belonged to a "time of gloomy moods." Its slow movement is one of chamber music's memorable tragic utterances. There is a sense of world-weariness and lamentation brought about by slowly resolving suspensions in the low register of the piano and by the violin's extravagantly emotional melody. This sombre opening does have elements which lead to two main ideas of the flowing middle section. A triplet phrase played by the violin shortly before the cello's first entry foreshadows one of them. A rising scale figure on the cello provides for the other idea. The tonality change from minor to major for this central portion increases the sense of yearning. The uncomplicated finale, which follows without pause, turns to the tonic (D) this time in major, and lifts the tension created by the previous movements. The work ends with a feeling of joyous affirmation.