

A Trio Setting (1990)

Gunther Schuller

"My *Trio* for clarinet, violin, and piano is in four contrasting movements, formally retaining the quite traditional classic sequence of fast–slow–scherzo–fast. This reflects my strong belief that the old classic and romantic forms are far from exhausted and obsolete, as many *avant-gardists* in recent decades have tried to make us believe. They are as appropriate today as they were a hundred years ago, even when filled with the more rhythmically and chromatically complex tonal languages of today. It is also important that the contrasts of mood and character inherent in the classic symphonic forms—say, in a Mozart or Beethoven Symphony—be reestablished, for we have had in the last fifty years or so many multi-movement pieces in which, alas, every movement—whether marked *Adagio* or *Presto*—sounds alike.

The first movement of *A Trio Setting*, marked *Fast and Explosive*, is a virtuoso *tour de force*, primarily for the clarinet, although by and by, the other two instruments join in a merry chase. The first clarinet run is like the shot of an arrow, and it never stops flying in a kind of headlong perpetual motion, traversing a few jazz licks along the way.

The second movement—*Slow and Dreamy*—has lazily moving figures (like quietly moving clouds in the sky on a calm day) set against rich, floating piano harmonies. A sudden brief climax subsides as quickly as it arose. A series of breezy cadenzas for each instrument brings the movement to a calm close.

A *Scherzo* follows, rhythmically complex, but nonetheless mostly light and airy. Eventually the music's energy is spent leading to a calmer middle section, *Andante*. Here the clarinet sings sweetly over soft accompanying piano chords. The *scherzando* mood is recapitulated briefly and the movement ends surprisingly and abruptly.

Strong leaping figures initiate the last movement, undoubtedly the structurally densest music in the entire work. But this music, too, is soon becalmed, and a slow *cantabile* episode (in 6/4) with wide arching figures in clarinet and violin take over. However, a return to the initial *agitato* music restores the *Finale's* true character, with the movement—and the piece—ending in a dramatic burst of sound and fury."

—Gunther Schuller

The world premiere of *A Trio Setting* was on July 11, 1990 in the Verdehr Trio Summer Chamber Music Concert Series at the Wharton Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, Michigan.

Gunther Schuller (1925–2015) was born in Queens, New York and became a world-renowned composer, conductor, performer, educator, writer, record producer, and music publisher. His life-long advocacy of other composers was as unflagging in its energy and scope as his pursuit of his own musical expression.

Schuller performed professionally from the age of sixteen when he began playing horn with the New York Philharmonic. He later became principal horn in the Cincinnati Symphony and Metropolitan Opera Orchestra. He was also active in the New York bebop scene and recorded with Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis, the Modern Jazz Quartet, and Ornette Coleman among others.

At the age of twenty-five, Schuller started his teaching career at the Manhattan School of Music. An educator of extraordinary influence, he also served on the faculty of Yale University (1964–1967) and became President of the New England Conservatory (1967–1977). He succeeded Aaron Copland as Head of Contemporary Music Activities at Tanglewood Music Center where he served for twenty years. In 1984, he became Artistic Director of the Festival at Standpoint, Idaho.

In 1959, Schuller gave up performing to devote his time primarily to composition. He wrote more than one hundred eighty original compositions in virtually every music genre. His works range from solo works to concertos, symphonies, opera, and many that fall outside standard genre classifications. One of his earliest works, written at the age of nineteen, was a horn concerto that he premiered as soloist with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra under Eugene Goossens.

Schuller's orchestral works were written for major orchestras of the world and have become classics of the modern repertoire. Prominent among these are *Where the Word Ends*, premiered by James Levine and the Boston Symphony Orchestra; *Of Reminiscences and Reflections*, written for the Louisville Symphony Orchestra and winner of the 1994 Pulitzer Prize in Music; *The Past Is the Present*, written for the centennial of the Cincinnati Symphony, also in 1994. Schuller deemed the latter two works as memorial tributes to his wife of forty-nine years, Marjorie Black.

Schuller added notably to the percussion ensemble repertoire with his *Grand Concerto for Percussion and Keyboards*, featuring more than one hundred percussion instruments. Written for the New England Conservatory Percussion Ensemble, the *Grand Concerto* was premiered at Tanglewood in 2005 under the composer's direction.

As a composer, Schuller was central in precipitating a new stylistic approach that combines the total-chromatic language of Schoenberg and the structural sophistication of the contemporary classical with the ensemble fluidity and swing of jazz. He coined the term "Third Stream" to describe the style, and he collaborated in its development with John Lewis, the Modern Jazz Quartet, and others.

Schuller's realizations and orchestrations of music by composers from Tallis and Monteverdi to John Knowles Paine and Charles Ives coexist with his concert ensemble arrangements of classic jazz standards by Jelly Roll Morton, Dizzy Gillespie, and Duke Ellington. Also of special importance is Schuller's work with the music of ragtime composers. He formed the New England Conservatory Ragtime Ensemble, whose recording *The Red Book*, consisting of works of Scott Joplin, won a Grammy Award in 1973. This recording and other arrangements and performances of Scott Joplin's music resulted in an immense resurgence of interest in both Joplin and ragtime.

In the late 1970s, Schuller started the GunMar and Margun music publishing companies (now part of G. Schirmer), and in 1980, he started his own recording company, GM Recordings. He authored dozens of essays and numerous educational works with subjects ranging from horn performance, to jazz, to conducting, to history. His autobiography, *Gunther Schuller: A Life in Pursuit of Music and Beauty*, was published in 2011.

Schuller's numerous awards include the Pulitzer Prize, two Guggenheim fellowships, the MacArthur Genius Award, the Darius Milhaud Award, the Rodgers and Hammerstein Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Gold Medal for Music, a BMI Lifetime Achievement Award, Columbia University's William Schuman Award for lifetime achievement in American music composition, a Jazz Masters Fellowship for Advocacy, and an Edward MacDowell Medal for outstanding contributions in his field.