Brainin trio plays in 'Verdi' tuning

by Hartmut Cramer

The "Concert in the Verdi Tuning" performed for a capacity audience at the Wiesbaden Casino Association in Germany on Jan. 18, was a memorable, even historic event. It was likely the first time since the golden age of classical composition, which extended from around 1770 to the mid-1820s, that the outstanding piano trios of Mozart (E major, KV 542), Beethoven (D major, Op. 70, No. 1) and Schubert (E major, Op. 100) were played in the tuning for which the composers had created them, with concert A set at 432 hertz, instead of the "standard" A-440 (and higher) of most instrumental performance today.

The "experiment" in Wiesbaden, sponsored by the Private Academy for Humanistic Studies, goes against the stream of ruling musical taste, with its incessant demands for "brilliance," and it took courage on the part of the three artists, who rank among some of the leading concert performers. But also, they played with uncompromising integrity, *truthful* to the composers' intentions, as classical works are only too seldom heard.

Norbert Brainin, the first violinist of the unforgettable Amadeus Quartet, was joined by Cologne pianist Günter Ludwig and Hamburg 'cellist Klaus Stoppel, who at the last minute replaced Martin Lovett, Brainin's Amadeus colleague, who was ill. Evocative of the standards set for 40 years by the Amadeus Quartet, especially because of the conceptual ability of Norbert Brainin, the performance gained an added dimension through the choice of the classical tuning fork which has become known as the "Verdi A." (The great Italian opera composer had this tuning, based on a middle C at 256 hz, decreed as the standard pitch in Italy in 1884.) Thanks to this lower pitch, the polyphony sounded richer, the voice-leading more distinct, the melody warmer and more natural.

Even the piano—the instrument which is least expected to "sing," compared to the bowed instruments—proved this result. The opening solo measures of Mozart's E-major Trio, KV 542, caused a sensation in this regard, helped by the beautiful tone of the Schimmel grand piano, which had been gradually tuned down to the classical pitch over several weeks by the manufacturer in Braunschweig, as well as by the expressive, differentiated, and tuneful playing of Günter Ludwig, who has been playing concerts with Brainin for several years—and since their Munich debut at the "Verdi tuning" on Dec. 12, 1988, increasingly at this pitch.

Brainin's 1713 "Huberman" Stradivarius, and the 1690 Matteo Goffriller 'cello played by Klaus Stoppel were well matched to the modern grand. These are not "original instruments" (as in the current fad for "authenticity"), but are the only appropriate ones, as they were used by musicians in the era of the classics. Stradivari not only designed his famous violins to play at C-256, but also—as emphasized by Lyndon LaRouche, who inspired the campaign to restore the tuning that had prevailed from Bach through Brahms—because these instruments expand the range of vocal polyphony in a way integrated with the principles of the trained "bel canto" singing voice.

The interpretation of the Mozart trio stood out for its clear voice-leading, which both evoked Mozart's debt to his forerunner Bach, and heralded Beethoven. The Beethoven "Ghost Trio," Op. 70, No. 1, brought an ovation from the audience filled with young musicians. Guided by Norbert Brainin, who is proud of his "radical" interpretations of Beethoven, the three musicians deliberately provoked a confrontation not only with Beethoven's art and his world of ideas, but also, and unmistakably, with modern taste. Brainin says, "If Beethoven expressly prescribes *sotto voce,* then I *must* keep myself to that, even if to most people today that seems 'too extreme.' " Rarely does one experience this trio played in a way to get so intensely "under the skin," especially in the slow movement; even the famous performances by Pablo Casals (for example the live recordings with Sandor Vegh and Karl Engel of 1961 in Prades), fall short of the Wiesbaden concert.

In a direct challenge to today's compartmentalized thinking, the musicians persuasively conveyed the inner coherence of the trios, spanning nearly four decades of the greatest creative upsurge in the history of music, through their lively and "Beethovenian" execution of all three works, playing the melodic lines so singingly that the "corners and edges," richly present in all three works, stood out clearly, even to the point of roughness.

Mozart wrote the E-major Trio in 1788, after his intensive studies of Bach's counterpoint technique had led him to a trail-blazing discovery in his musical development (in the C-minor Fantasy for piano, KV 475). In that very year, 18-year-old Beethoven was being trained by his teacher Neefe in Bonn in J.S. Bach's contrapuntal technique, and was studying Mozart's works. Beethoven's "Ghost Trio," composed in 1808, just 20 years after Mozart's E-major Trio, was preceded by his own revolutionary works—the "Razumovsky Quartets" Op. 59, written in 1805, or the Fifth Symphony, with which Beethoven had astonished even the musically sophisticated public of Vienna. The third piece on the program was composed by Schubert in 1827, not quite 20 years later: the Piano Trio, Op. 100. The encore, the *Allegretto ma non troppo* from Beethoven's Op. 70, No. 2, made this musical coherence especially clear, for, as announced by Brainin, it sounded astonishingly "like Schubert."