Beethoven Piano Trios
E flat major, op1 no1 • G major, op1 no2
THE LONDON FORTEPIANINO TRIO
please note

FULL DIGITAL ARTWORK
IS NOT CURRENTLY AVAILABLE
FOR THIS TITLE.

PLEASE EXCUSE ANY FORMATTING
OR SPELLING ODDITIES IN THIS
SCANNED BOOKLET.
When Beethoven reached Vienna, from Bonn, in November 1792, he arrived in a city ten times the size of his birthplace. The city which was to become his home would first have branded him a 'foreigner' since his Rhenish German would have been scarcely comprehensible to a native Viennese. At this time he had no idea of making Vienna his permanent home, simply of making his name as a musician in the city before returning to Bonn.

Fate was to prove otherwise and soon the first of Beethoven's high-born patrons, Prince Karl Lichnowsky, was to give the young genius a comfortable abode in his princely residence. Lichnowsky was but one of a cosmopolitan congregation of musical nobles, living in Vienna, who were to be so influential in the developing career of the great musician. Several of these enlightened and musically talented patrons were to be immortalised by having their names inscribed at the head of Beethoven scores. Fittingly, Prince Lichnowsky was the first recipient of such a dedication with the three Piano Trios, Opus 1. They were first performed at Lichnowsky's residence during a gala evening at which Haydn was the principal guest. This was shortly before Haydn journeyed to England in January 1794.

The gala evening, though a musical success, was less happy in terms of personal relationships. Beethoven, who had been studying counterpoint with Haydn, professed astonishment at the latter's advice not to publish the third Trio of the set, lest it proved to be too 'advanced' to be favourably received by the public. Haydn's view was interpreted by Beethoven as an expression of jealousy, a view of the benign older composer that more mature thought would surely disavow. Yet, although the Trios became well-known and admired by musicians, Beethoven spent considerable time on revising them before their eventual publication in 1795. Lichnowsky generously helped with the cost of engraving and Artaria and Company printed the works together with a list of 123 subscribers. Such was the success of the Piano Trios with the music-buying public that Artaria published the three Piano Sonatas Opus 2, under their own promotion, in 1796.

Beethoven's first three Piano Trios are full of interest, apart from the inherent fascination they hold as the first published works by one of the world's greatest artists on the threshold of his career. Their formal relationships to the classical ideals of Haydn, Clementi and Cherubini are undeniable, though even here Beethoven extends the established format from three to four movements, creates a cello part free from the restrictions of the keyboard bass-line and, with offbeat accents and tension-creating tonal relationships, achieves a new and more dynamic manner of musical expression. The first of the Opus 1 Trios is considered by some critics to have Mozartian themes and clarity, whilst the second is thought to owe more to Haydn, especially in the slow movement and in the Finale. Such views are largely incidental since Beethoven's individual voice can be heard, even in his earliest works, by those with ears to hear and sensibilities to appreciate.

For such enlightened listeners the use of a fortepiano in these recordings will bring added pleasure and understanding since its tone relates closely to the instrument Beethoven knew at the end of the nineteenth century. Not that there existed during Beethoven's time an established piano sound. In fact the earliest pianos he knew differed greatly from those he used in later life,
even from maker to maker and from country to country. But the fundamental differences in timbre between Beethoven’s pianos and ours is explained by the frames used — wooden in the early pianos, and iron more recently. A wooden-framed piano possesses a clarity of resonance which cannot be matched by the thicker-stringed, iron-framed instrument. This led to many misrepresentations of Beethoven’s dynamic markings when ‘modern’, more powerful pianos came into general use. This clarity is very noticeable in the tenor register, the lower middle of the keyboard, in which Beethoven frequently employs quick-moving figures that spring to life when played on the earlier pianos but can sound thick and unclear on the more powerful iron-framed instruments.

Such pianos as Beethoven knew possessed a dynamic range between pp and ff that was much greater than is commonly understood and, although they cannot compare in terms of sheer volume with modern pianos, their tonal output was quite sufficient for the size of concert room in which they were employed. Without an appreciation of these facts it is very easy for pianists using modern instruments to interpret Beethoven’s dynamic markings in an exaggerated, unmusical way. The collected letters of Beethoven in the Emily Anderson translation throw an interesting light on the composer’s opinion of the fortepiano, particularly as the letter quoted dates from the period in which the Trios Opus 1 appeared. The letter is addressed to Johann Andreas Streicher, the piano maker:

Dear Streicher!
I have received the day before yesterday your fortepiano, which is really an excellent instrument. Anyone else would try to keep it for himself; but I — now you must have a good laugh — I should be deceiving you if I didn’t tell you that in my opinion it is far too good for me, and why? — Well, because it robs me of the freedom to produce my own tone. But this must not deter you from making all your fortepianos in the same way. For no doubt there are few people who cherish such whims as mine. But I trust that, without having to remind you of this in my letter, you are wholly convinced of my heartfelt desire that the merits of your instrument should be recognised in the country and everywhere. . . .

The development of the harpsichord into the instrument which could play loud and soft and offer such contrasts as the fortepiano, corresponded to so much else that occurred in the so-called Age of Enlightenment — a time when accepted concepts were challenged as never before and when artists eventually wrested their freedom from the humility of servitude. Whilst Voltaire was the brightest star of the Enlightenment, it was Beethoven who championed the artists’s cause in music, and who became the world’s first self-employed composer.

As Paul Henry Lang in his Music in Western Civilisation has pointed out, Schiller and Beethoven were not born for a quiet life. Their work reveals the burning protestation of the redeeming force of pure humanity. Even Goethe was stunned by Beethoven’s ‘Untamed personality’ and by his ‘grandiose, great and mad music’. Beethoven’s Opus 1 may not take us into the mysterious orbits of his late works, but already we are sufficiently elevated to glimpse those horizons over which he was soon to lead us — and enrich our lives.

PETER LAMB 1986
The London Fortepiano Trio was formed in 1978. As leading performers in their field, it is their aim to present the piano trios of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and their contemporaries as they were heard by their first audiences. There is perhaps no form of chamber music that benefits more from the ‘historical’ approach than the piano trio. The aesthetic intentions of the composers in both style and structure, scale and sonority, are indivisibly linked to the instrumentation; the crucial balance between strings and keyboard is here transformed by the use of an eighteenth-century fortepiano and stringed instruments in classical condition.

The London Fortepiano Trio has given many concerts throughout Europe which have included appearances at the English Bach Festival, in Paris, Brussels, and Florence, and it broadcasts regularly for the BBC and Belgian radio. In 1982 the Trio celebrated Haydn’s 250th anniversary with a series of twelve concerts at the Purcell Room in London which received wide critical acclaim. The Times described the series as ‘one of the most valuable features of the season.’