

MÉLANGE À TROIS

Put love, musical and otherwise, into the mix, and you have the recipe for chamber music of taste and wit.

PREVIEW by John Chacona
Contributing writer

Third wheel. Third man in the ring. Three's a crowd. In our culture of pairs, three is an odd number in more ways than one.

Trios are not uncommon in concert music, especially the piano, violin, and cello configuration that has been around since Haydn's day. What is less common is a trio where two of the participants are married — a trio like Strata.

I asked Strata's pianist, Audrey Andrist, if she and husband, violinist (and sometime violist) James Stern, ever bring musical disagreements home.

"No, we get along wonderfully," she told me by phone from her Maryland home, where she was juggling a practice routine with packing for an important New York engagement. "Some couples can't play together, though they have wonderful marriages. We might have musical disagreements, but it's been very easy for us."

The two met 14 years ago while both stu-

dents at the Juilliard School.

It was at Juilliard where the third side of the triangle, clarinetist Nathan Williams, was added. I asked Andrist if Williams ever feels left out, or even outvoted. "Not at all," she said. "Nathan is family."

Her description is not merely lip service. You can hear it in Strata's seamless ensemble and well-gauged articulation, itself the product of many years of togetherness, musical and otherwise.

ANDRIST IS A NATIVE OF the prairie province of Saskatchewan, where she grew up in a musical home. All four children played piano, and Andrist was immediately drawn to the instrument. Given the national emphasis on cooperation and compromise, I asked Andrist if Canadians might have a predisposition for chamber music.

She laughed at the notion. "That's an idea

that never came to me. All of my degrees are in solo piano performance, but I feel that where my heart is in the chamber-music repertoire. I enjoy the camaraderie."

Camaraderie is at the heart of Strata's program. The great Trio in E-Flat, K. 498, was composed to be played by Mozart and two of his closest friends. Geniality and affection

shine in every bar of this treasureable work. Mozart may not have composed it in a bowling alley (the "Kegelstatt" of the work's nickname), but it was clear that he was enjoying himself.

The same geniality permeates Darius Milhaud's little Suite, Op. 157b.

Adapted from the incidental music for Jean Anouilh's "Le voyageur sans bagage," it is maddeningly tuneful, from the jaunty, Provençal-flavored overture to the good-humored finale.

The third work on the program, Robert Maggio's "Riddle," was written for Strata and has come to be a signature piece for the trio.

"We actually recorded ['Riddle'] before the world premiere and had played the first movement as an encore for a while before the premiere. Since then, we've put it on almost every program we play because we love it so much."



Top to bottom: Williams, Stern, and Andrist

Strata on CD

Strata has released two recordings. One, an all-Maggio disc, including "Riddle," I have not heard. The other "violin / clannet / piano" (Arizona University Recordings AUR CD 3097) offers a program of 20th-century music that's not what you think.

The opening Trio by Soviet composer Aram Khachaturian dates from the early years of Stalin's rule and leans heavily (and delightfully) on Armenian folk idioms. The four of Max Bruch's "Eight Pieces, Op. 83," though composed in 1910, are dark and Brahmsian and could have easily dated from a half-century earlier.

Donald Freund's 1980 "Triomusic" and Martin Rokeach's "can't wait," from the final year of the century, are appealing and accessible, while asking for a full range of instrumental virtuosity.

The most modern-sounding piece on the CD is Igor Stravinsky's own 1920 arrangement of five numbers from "L'Histoire du Soldat," a full performance of which will be given late this month at Mercyhurst College. They are eccentric, delightful, bursting with invention, and the Strata players have a ball with them.

The CD is available through the label's Web site at www.aurec.com or, if you're lucky, at a table at the Behrend concert.

— John Chacona

Strata will perform Tuesday at noon in the atrium of Penn State-Behrend's Reed Union Building. It's free and open to the public.