

## **Johann Nepomuk Hummel: Quintet for piano and strings in Eb Major, op. 87**

By Jeffrey Solow

Austro-Hungarian pianist and composer Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837) as metaphorically characterized by Scott Fogelson, “belonged to a generation of composers whose posthumous stars have been obliged to twinkle through the glare of Beethoven’s supernova.”

Born in Pressburg, Hungary (now Bratislava, Slovakia), Hummel was a Mozartean child prodigy at the keyboard who won renown for his virtuosic improvisations, a skill at which he was the only serious rival to Beethoven. (The two maintained an up-and-down relationship that ultimately settled into one of mutual respect. Hummel visited Beethoven three times while he was on his deathbed and at Beethoven's request improvised at his memorial concert—at which event Hummel began a warm friendship with Franz Schubert.)

Hummel’s father, Josef, was the director of the Imperial School of Military Music in Vienna and conductor of Emanuel Schikaneder's Theater Orchestra; his mother was Slovakian. After hearing the 8-year-old Johann play, Mozart was so impressed that he offered to teach him—but only on condition that Hummel should live with him so that he could carefully oversee his studies. Mozart taught and housed Johann free of charge for two years and even presented him, at the age of nine, in his public debut at one of his own concerts.

With his father Hummel embarked on a European tour, ultimately arriving in London where he stayed for four years to study with Muzio Clementi. In 1791, Joseph Haydn, who was then in London, composed his sonata in Ab for Hummel, who premiered it in Haydn's presence. Upon returning to Vienna he took lessons from Johann Albrechtsberger and Haydn (along with Beethoven) and with Antonio Salieri.

In 1804, Hummel succeeded Haydn as Kapellmeister to Prince Esterházy's court in Eisenstadt, a post he held for seven years before being dismissed for neglecting his duties (too much concertizing?). Subsequently Hummel served as Kapellmeister at Stuttgart and at Weimar, where he befriended Goethe and Schiller, and by inviting Europe’s foremost musicians to visit and perform transformed Weimar into a music capital. He also labored on behalf of his colleagues by starting (and personally funding through benefit concerts) a groundbreaking pension program for aging musicians and was one of the first composers to fight for intellectual property rights through music copyrighting.

Hummel was a highly successful (and highly paid) teacher whose piano method, *A Complete Theoretical and Practical Course of Instruction on the Art of Playing the Piano Forte* (1828), sold thousands of copies and initiated a revolution in piano technique, moving away from Mozart’s highly articulated style of playing and ushering in the more fluid and legato approach of Chopin and Liszt. (Czerny, who transferred to Hummel after studying for three years with Beethoven, later taught Liszt.)

Among the works in Hummel's phenomenally prolific output are 8 piano concertos; concertos for trumpet, mandolin and bassoon; 10 piano sonatas; 8 piano trios; a piano quartet; a piano quintet; sonatas for cello and for mandolin; 2 piano septets; a quartet for clarinet, violin, viola and cello; a wind octet; four-hand piano music; 22 operas and *singspiels*; 5 masses and other religious works—but no symphonies! Although he died rich and famous, most of Hummel's music was quickly forgotten and only his Septet, op. 78 and his Trumpet Concerto remained in the repertoire through the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. In recent years, however, many of Hummel's works are being rediscovered, performed and recorded.

Writing in W.W. Cobbett's *Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*, critic and composer Rudolf Felber (1891-1978) observed that, "In his time Hummel played a very prominent part, and was considered by his followers as a rival to Beethoven, a comparison which today appears incomprehensible." But he also describes the Quintet, op. 87 as "a masterpiece; the first movement at once captivates and impresses the hearer with its power and passion. The minuet [is] a mixture of animation and exuberance with a melancholy strain. A short *Largo* full of pleasing melody and deep feeling is followed by the final *Allegro agitato* [where] light-hearted merriment reigns, and the movement ends with a brilliant and effective close." Conductor, music critic and educator (Juilliard professor and director of Peabody) Richard Franko Goldman, writing in *The Musical Quarterly* (Jan. 1967), even declared the quintet to be superior to Schumann's! Tonight's listeners are invited to form their own opinions.