Piano Trio No. 2
Composer: André Previn
Institutional Info: vn, vc, pro
Premiering Artists: Kalichstein-Laredo-Robinson Trio
Duration: 18'

Program Notes
André Previn — composer, conductor, pianist, author — is among the most prodigiously talented musicians of our time. Born in Berlin in 1929 to a family of Russian-Jewish descent, he studied piano at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik until his parents were forced to flee Germany by the Nazis in 1938. The Previn then settled briefly in Paris, where the nine-year-old André continued his studies at the Conservatoire with Marcel Dupré, before moving permanently to Los Angeles; the young musician became an American citizen in 1943.

Though Previn was a student of Max Rubinstein in piano, Joseph Achron and Ernst Toch in theory, and Mario Castelnuovo-Tedesco in composition, his earlier professional experience, gained even before he finished high school, was as a jazz pianist and an orchestrator for MGM Studios, where a distant cousin, Charles, was music director. Previn joined the staff of MGM upon his graduation and composed his first film score, The Sun Comes Up, in 1948. He also built a reputation at that time as a jazz pianist and recorded a number of successful albums. In 1961, he began studying conducting with Pierre Monteux, then Music Director of the San Francisco Symphony, and soon left MGM to work as a free-lance orchestrator of film scores, receiving thirteen Academy Award nominations and winning Oscars for Gigi (1958), Porgy and Bess (1959), Irma la Douce (1963), and My Fair Lady (1964), and to develop his career as a concert pianist and conductor. He conducted widely following his podium debut in St. Louis in 1962 and was appointed Music Director of the Houston Symphony Orchestra in 1967. The following year, he was named Principal Conductor of the London Symphony Orchestra, a post he held until 1979; he has been the orchestra’s Chief Conductor since 1993. Previn has also served as Music Director of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra (1976–1984), Los Angeles Philharmonic (1985–1989), London’s Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (1985-1991), and Oslo Philharmonic (2002-2006). In 2009, he was appointed Principal Guest Conductor of Tokyo’s NHK Symphony Orchestra.

Previn has guest conducted leading orchestras throughout the world, and served as Artistic Director of London’s South Bank Festival (1972-1974) and the 1981 British Music Festival in Pittsburgh, New York, and Washington, D.C. and as a faculty member at the Berkshire Music Center. He is one of the most-recorded musicians throughout history, with over well 200 releases and ten Grammy Awards. Though Previn’s appearances as a pianist have been limited because of the scope of his work as a conductor, he has been heard regularly in chamber music and as soloist–conductor in concertos by Mozart. He has returned to jazz in recent years, recording with guitarist Joe Pass and bassist Ray Brown, and touring Japan, Europe, and North America with the André Previn Jazz Trio. Previn’s works include 4 operas, 3 ballets, 5 orchestral works, 9 songs for voice and piano, 2 concertos, 10 string quartets, 12 chamber music works, and numerous film music projects. His compositions and recordings have received many awards, including the 1994 Grammy Award for Album of the Year for his 2004 recording of the Mozart Requiem, and the 1997 Grammy Award for Classical Album of the Year for his 1995 recording of the Stravinsky Rite of Spring.

André Previn has composed in both popular and concert genres: scores for the musicals Gigi, Cabaret, and The Good Company; a piano concerto for the Los Angeles Philharmonic; a Symphony for Strings; a half-dozen concertos; Overture to a Comedy, Principal Reflections, and Diversions for orchestra; numerous chamber and piano works; a theater piece for actors and orchestra titled Every Good Boy Deserves Favour, with words by Tom Stoppard; and symphonies for Kathleen Battle, Barbara Bonney, Janet Baker, and Ailyn Pérez. His commission from the San Francisco Opera, he created an opera based on Tennessee Williams’ A Streetcar Named Desire. The opera, with a libretto by Philip Littled and soprano Renee Fleming as Blanche Dubois, was given its premiere by the San Francisco Opera in September 1999, its recording on Deutsche Grammophon won a Grand Prix du Disque. His recent operas include: the Double Concerto for Violin and Viola, premiered in April 2009 in New York by Anne-Sophie Mutter, Yuri Bashmet, and the Orchestra of St. Luke’s under the composer’s direction at an all-Previn concert honoring his 80th birthday; a Clarinet Sonata (2010) for Boston Symphony Orchestra clarinetist Thomas O’Halloran; and a Cello Concerto, premiered by Daniel Müller-Schott and the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra in June 2011; and the Triple Concerto for Horn, Trumpet, and Viola, and the Principal brass players of the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra and its principal brass players in March 2012.

Previn composed his Piano Trio No. 2 in 2011 for the Kalichstein–Laredo–Robinson Trio on a commission from Music Accord, a consortium of ten major chamber music presenters that has commissioned more than twenty new works from leading American composers since its founding in 1997. The Piano Trio No. 2 op. 171, with tentatively rising figures in cello and violin answered by sustained chords in the piano. The motion becomes continuous, leading to a wide-ranging theme in the strings. The rhythm abruptly turns dark, gathering tension through diatonic and chromatic dissonance. The musicians performed with snap precision and lyricism.

Reviews
André Previn’s Piano Trio No. 2, heard in its Boston premiere, showcased more of the ensemble’s versatility. Co-commissioned by the KLR Trio and the Celebrity Series, the three-movement work is a curious and accessible mix of musical styles and moods. Describing the 20-minute trio, Kalichstein noted that “Previn writes about himself, about wonderful tunes, Shostakovich darkness, and wit.” The opening movement contains all of these elements. Previn’s melodies hint at the popular songs of Tin Pan Alley, but the music quickly turns dark, gathering tension through diatonic and chromatic dissonance. The musicians performed with snap precision and lyricism. The somber second movement opened with Robinson’s cello in a mournful cantabile phrase, which Laredo answered in counterpoint. As the texture grew increasingly thinner, Robinson and Laredo traded falling motives with lullaby-like charm while Kalichstein accompanied with polite figuration. As the movement concluded, Previn’s music became increasingly chromatic, even coldly distant. Through it all, KLR effectively handled the emotional restraint without losing focus.

Previn’s wit was on display in the brief, jazzy finale where his music assumed a hard-driving style—a mix of Gershwin’s rhythm and Bartok’s dense harmony. Syncopated chords seem to pop out at random in the churning cascade of sixteenth notes, all of which KLR handled deftly.

— Aaron Keebaugh, Boston Classical Review

André Previn’s Piano Trio No. 2 was a work commissioned by KLR and premiered last May at Lincoln Center, here given its Chicago premiere. The twenty-minute, three-movement work is every bit as eclectic as Previn himself, who has encompassed the various roles of a Hollywood orchestrator, contemporary music composer, and concert pianist over his long career. Happily, the Second Trio celebrates all of these aspects of Previn’s art. The work is surprisingly chomatic, sometimes flirting on the edge of tonality but always remaining diatonically.

The ideas are fast and furious, and moving from lesion tone-clusters in the upper piano register to overtly sentimental violin lines that have traces of Bartok and Shostakovich. Scriabin-like piano musings morph into advanced harmonic bebop, sometimes with the strings used percussively. What is refreshing about the piece is that while authentically dwelling within the worlds of contemporary music and the popular idioms of jazz and show music, it mercilessly inhabits these worlds without attempting to bridge them via crossovers and always with a mischievous
...André Previn’s 2011 Piano Trio No. 2 — a Boston premiere — was a perfect fit: relaxed conversation whether the topic is serious or sunny. Previn might not venture outside his comfort zone, but that zone is larger than most; the music’s dominant feature is pure fluency. Styles meet and greet with effortless etiquette. The borders between European classicism, expansive Americana, and Hollywood shamanism are crisscrossed with cosmopolitan ease.

Previn’s recent music (“Music for Boston,” premiered by the Boston Symphony last summer, for instance, or “Octet for Eleven,” written for the BSO Chamber Players), the Trio can seem rather formally loose, but the stream of consciousness is unusually smooth. Previn is particularly efficient with simple thematic recapitulations, as in the slow movement, when Robinson’s long, angular opening cello solo returned with Kalichstein’s accompaniment making manifest the melody’s latent cinematic arc.

The composer, a longtime friend of Laredo and Robinson, wrote his Trio for them, as well as a new Double Concerto, to have its world premiere in two weeks with the CSO in Music Hall. Previn is noted as a sensational jazz pianist, as well as a Hollywood film composer, conductor and composer of serious music. His Piano Trio No. 2 was sheer joy. The first movement was alternately songful and edgy, with an intensity that reminded one of Shostakovich (as pianist Joseph Kalichstein noted in his comments to introduce the work). Previn really knows how to write a tune, and the slow movement, which opened with a stunning, deeply interior theme for the cello, was an example of that gift. I loved how the violin and cello traded themes against deep and sometimes pungent chords in the piano. Kalichstein’s touch was like a warm cushion. The finale, marked “Fast,” was witty, light and jazzy. At one point, it flowed into a melody of absolute charm. The trio gave it a warm and joyous reading. - Janelle Gelfand, Cincinnati