

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 10 May 2025
7.30pm

Christian Tetzlaff violin
Tanja Tetzlaff cello
Kiveli Dörken piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Trio No. 4 in E K542 (1788)
I. Allegro • II. Andante grazioso • III. Allegro

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor Op. 66 (1845)
*I. Allegro energico e con fuoco •
II. Andante espressivo • III. Scherzo. Molto
allegro quasi presto • IV. Finale. Allegro
appassionato*

Interval

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Piano Trio in A minor Op. 50 (1881-2)
*I. Pezzo elegiaco - Moderato assai •
IIa. Tema con variazioni - IIb. Variazione finale
e coda*



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Mozart composed three piano trios, K542, K548 and K564, in the summer of 1788. He was in difficult financial circumstances at this time, and his friend Michael Puchberg (a fellow mason) was the recipient of a series of requests for loans – and further loans. One of these begging letters confirms that K452 was completed by June 1788, since Mozart proudly announces the fact. Another letter, this time sent in August to the composer's sister, Nannerl, is believed to refer to the same trio: asking Nannerl to play it for Michael Haydn, Mozart asserts that it could not possibly be disliked.

The summer of 1778 was also when Mozart's last three symphonies were composed. Because his income was reduced and his music was somewhat out of favour with the Viennese public, it has been speculated that his compositions from those months were for posterity rather than with performances in mind. This view is now largely discounted, though it seems strange that he did not apply himself more thoroughly to commercial propositions. True, chamber music involving the piano was generally a good seller in Vienna, but in these trios Mozart made few concessions to the limited keyboard technique of the amateur players who constituted the main market.

As it turns out, posterity has indeed been the benefactor of the composer's refusal to be held back by practicalities or rein in his imagination. The E major Trio (the only multi-movement work he wrote in this key) is rich in advanced harmonic progressions, melodies of elusive and ambiguous emotional effect, with the occasional brilliant flourish in the buoyant finale – impossible to dislike, just as Mozart said it would be.

The year 1845 came at a time of career triumph for **Mendelssohn**, but also of failing health and exhaustion. His mood might be gauged from the letter he wrote to the dedicatee of his C minor Piano Trio, his fellow composer Louis Spohr. Mendelssohn had long wanted to inscribe an important work to Spohr, he said, but 'nothing seemed good enough to me, and in fact neither does this trio'.

Yet there is no sign of failing powers. C minor is traditionally a key of determination in the face of hardship, at least to followers of Beethoven, whose fate-defying Fifth Symphony is in this key. So is his *Coriolan* overture, a work that Mendelssohn is said to have played on the piano with full orchestral effect, and whose character is echoed in parts of the Trio.

The very opening is a case in point: *sub fusc*, agitated rumbling that achieves thematic substance only with difficulty. It is with difficulty, too, that the first alternative subject maintains its shape as a half-pleading, half assertive melody – especially when its harmonic foundation slips away from under it. A third episode gathers the material in a chorale-like peroration. Further shifts of harmony permeate much of the development, and the coda is again

Beethovenian, falling into a mood of profound contemplation before the final rally and an abortive gesture towards apotheosis.

The lilting rhythm of the *Andante* is consoling after the uncertainties of the first movement; however, after the strings join the piano, less comfortable areas are explored. There is a mischievous quality to the play of the sprites in the *Scherzo*, and perhaps we emerge from it not entirely confident that the demons of the first movement have been vanquished. The finale launches with a Romani-tinged and purposeful tune. Then the second subject, a broad chorale, is announced by the piano, with the strings first commenting from the perspective of what has gone before, then joining in. The climactic return of this tune is truly overwhelming, and the resolution at the close is joyful and wholly convincing.

In March 1881, when he was in his mid-40s, the pianist, composer, conductor and teacher Nikolai Rubinstein died of tuberculosis. **Tchaikovsky**, in Rome at the time, soon began work on a Piano Trio in memory of his long-standing friend. The choice of medium is interesting. Four months before Rubinstein's death, Tchaikovsky's patron, Mme von Meck, had asked the composer for a piano trio, but he had replied that he could not stand the combination of piano and solo strings.

In the intervening time it appears that the challenge of writing a work for piano trio on his own terms had begun to appeal to Tchaikovsky. The resulting A minor Trio draws relatively little from the models of Beethoven, Schubert or Mendelssohn, either in texture or structure. Instead it is bold and imposing – a monumental work in all senses. In broad terms it is in two movements, the first an elegy, the second a theme and variations. But the final variation is preceded by a pause, and is expansive enough to form a separate finale to the entire Trio.

The first movement has all the neurotic tension we expect from the symphonic Tchaikovsky, but the development section surprisingly opens out into a slower, lyrical episode that moves from nostalgia to anguish and back again. A yearning violin cadenza leads us to the recapitulation; under the first subject, instead of the previous churning figuration from the piano, this time we hear a funeral bell. Its solemn tolling also permeates the coda.

The second movement's A major theme, announced by the piano, has a Classical purity and poise. Sombre thoughts are largely absent from the variations until the *Variation finale e coda*, which proceeds as a sonata movement in its own right. But there is an abrupt move to the tonic minor, with the strings crying out the opening theme of the first movement while the piano rages against fate. The close is a stark, austere funeral march.

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