

WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 13 November 2025
7.30pm

Nelson Goerner piano
Ning Feng violin
Edgar Moreau cello

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Trio in C minor Op. 1 No. 3 (1794-5)
*I. Allegro con brio • II. Andante cantabile con variazioni •
III. Menuetto. Quasi Allegro • IV. Finale. Prestissimo*

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975) Piano Trio No. 1 in C minor Op. 8 (1923)

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Trio élégiaque No. 2 in D minor Op. 9 (1893, rev. 1907, 1917)
*I. Moderato. Allegro vivace • II. Quasi variazione.
Andante • III. Allegro risoluto. Moderato*



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This programme brings together three piano trios which represented an important early step for each of their composers on a path towards musical greatness.

With the publication of his three Opus 1 piano trios in 1795, **Beethoven** signalled his real arrival on Vienna's music scene. He had shown a lot of promise in his hometown of Bonn, enough to convince the region's elector to send him to the Austrian capital to study with Haydn. His supporters hoped that Haydn would help the young composer capture the spirit of the recently-deceased Mozart, but the arrangement proved disappointing to Beethoven, who complained that he didn't really learn anything from the older man. He wrote relatively little under Haydn's tutelage – the Bonn elector grumbled about the value of his investment – but 1795 marked something of a change and the arrival in print of what we might consider 'mature' Beethoven.

Each of the three trios which comprise his Opus 1 are distinctly 'Beethoven': judiciously economical and never thickly textured, but with vigour and solidity which look forward to the 19th Century and its musical innovations. The Trio Op. 1 No. 3 is the only one in a minor key and seems initially to nod to the opening of Mozart's Piano Concerto in C minor, K491; what follows shows Beethoven's expertly fluent way with contrasting musical ideas, demonstrating how masterful his control of his material already was just as he was announcing himself to the Viennese public. Following a typically inventive theme-and-variations slow movement and a rhythmically tricky *Menuetto*, the young Beethoven's discipline and imagination are again evident in the finale's closing pages, which eschew the temptation for noisy minor key shock for something altogether more subtle and disturbing as the music slips away quietly, with a little tremor in the piano part near the end, like a troubling disturbance on otherwise calm water.

Shostakovich had just turned 17 when he composed his Piano Trio No. 1, but his life was already in the throes of young love and family tragedy. The death of his father (also named Dmitry) in 1922 tipped the family into financial hardship in the turbulent aftermath of the bloody Russian Civil War. Then, while a student preparing to graduate from the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1923, Shostakovich was struck down with a life-threatening illness which required recuperation in the warmer climes of Crimea. Here, away from the watchful eye of his mother, young Dmitry met his first girlfriend, Tatiana Glivenko, with whom he maintained a long-distance relationship for much of the next decade. When he returned from Crimea, with his health largely restored, he set about looking for work to support his family, and, with an eye to establishing himself as a mature composer, penned this one-movement Piano Trio and dedicated it to Tatiana. Much of his individual voice is clear here, from the sparse, brooding tone of the opening, to the sudden burst of angularity which follows it, though this

is also clearly the work of a young man finding his way in larger structures: the somewhat-grandiose conclusion is much indebted to the world of late-19th-century chamber music. The Trio did not make Shostakovich a star (his First Symphony, begun the following year, was stratospherically successful), and ultimately languished unpublished until after the composer's death, but remains a significant step in his development towards the greatness which he was soon to prove.

As a young composer trying to establish himself, **Rachmaninov** had enjoyed the support of Tchaikovsky; he was devastated when the great man died and composed his *Trio élégiaque* No. 2 as an expression of his sense of loss. Their relationship had begun inauspiciously – Tchaikovsky fuming at the unimaginative work the teenage Rachmaninov had done on a piano transcription of the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty* – but he soon took an enthusiastic interest in Rachmaninov's music while the younger man was working on his one-act opera *Aleko*. Tchaikovsky attended rehearsals and praised what he heard, asking Rachmaninov if he would object to its being performed alongside his own two-act opera *Iolanta* ("Would you object?" He was 53, a famous composer, but I was a novice of 20!). Rachmaninov's career was ascendent in 1893, and he had just returned to Moscow after making his conducting debut in performances of *Aleko*, when he was struck by the shock news of Tchaikovsky's death. His intense feelings of grief were poured into writing a second *Trio élégiaque*, a much-enlarged sequel to his first, a 15-minute trio composed a year earlier. But while the first had been reeled off at lightning speed in just a few days, the second took substantial effort – Rachmaninov wrote of it that 'as it says in one of my songs, "all the time I was tormented and sick in heart". I trembled for every phrase, sometimes crossed out everything and began again to think, think...'

The substantial work he produced became a double homage to Tchaikovsky; to the man himself, and to the great composer's own Piano Trio of 1882, written after the death of the Russian pianist Nikolai Rubinstein. Like that earlier example, Rachmaninov's second *Trio élégiaque* begins and ends in mournful reflection, recalling the opening music at the end of the piece. The first movement bears the full weight of the loss which inspired it, lasting some 20 minutes, and deriving much of its material from short motifs of falling phrases, like musical sighs. The second movement begins with a theme of surprising simplicity, followed by imaginative variations, before a concise finale closes the sombre loop. Rachmaninov revised the work a number of times in the decades which followed; it remains an important marker of the passing of a mantle from one great Russian artist to another.

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