

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 1 December 2024
7.30pm

Z.E.N. Trio

Esther Yoo violin
Narek Haknazaryan cello
Zee Zee piano

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Trio élégiaque No. 1 in G minor Op. posth (1892)

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor Op. 67 (1943-4)
*I. Andante - Moderato • II. Allegro non troppo •
III. Largo • IV. Allegretto*

Interval

Arno Babadjanian (1921-1983)

Piano Trio in F sharp minor (1952)
*I. Largo - Allegro espressivo • II. Andante •
III. Allegro vivace*

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The piano trio in Russia has long been associated with emotions of grief and mourning. It is a tradition that goes back to Tchaikovsky, whose Piano Trio in A minor Op. 50 was dedicated to the memory of Nikolay Rubinstein, who died suddenly in March 1881. Tchaikovsky's use of the trio to honour a recently deceased friend was emulated by subsequent composers. When Tchaikovsky himself died in 1893, the young Rachmaninov poured his emotions into his second *Trio élégiaque*, Op. 9; and Arensky's first trio (1894) is dedicated to the memory of the cellist Karl Davydov.

By contrast, **Rachmaninov's** first *Trio élégiaque* has no particular dedicatee, although its tone is certainly melancholic and anguished. Written in just four days in January 1892, it was premièred at the end of the month with the composer himself at the piano. Listeners familiar with Tchaikovsky's trio will hear plenty of self-conscious echoes of it in Rachmaninov's student work, yet Rachmaninov was no epigone. Cast in a single movement, his trio deftly develops the opening theme in various contrasting ways, making room for each of the instruments to take the limelight. It remained unpublished during Rachmaninov's lifetime and did not appear in print until 1947.

Shostakovich too composed a youthful single-movement trio that remained unpublished until after his death – the Piano Trio No. 1 Op. 8 of 1923, written when he was still a student at the Leningrad Conservatory. He wrote few chamber works in the years after that, but following the denunciation of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* in *Pravda* in January 1936, he turned increasingly to the apparent abstraction of instrumental music in order to convey powerful emotions without the need to employ words. Shostakovich produced the first of his 15 quartets in 1938, and this was followed by a piano quintet in 1940. The Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor Op. 67 was begun in late 1943 and completed the following summer. Initially, Shostakovich's interest was purely musical, and the trio's four movements demonstrate a formidable command of long-range structure, especially the third-movement passacaglia. What transformed it from an exercise in form into an expression of profound personal grief was the death in February 1944 of Ivan Sollertinsky. A brilliant and charismatic polymath, Sollertinsky was a key figure in Leningrad's literary, theatrical and musical circles, exerting a profound intellectual and creative influence on the young Shostakovich.

Although the trio is dedicated to the memory of Sollertinsky, it encodes another set of tragic references. As the Red Army pushed into Central Europe, it came across the death camps, revealing to the world the unimaginable horror of the Holocaust. Although Stalin would later silence explicit discussion of Jewish suffering, for a few brief years Soviet historians and artists laboured to document what had happened in the territories occupied by the Nazis. In the finale of his trio, Shostakovich incorporated references to the traditional

Jewish klezmer music of Eastern Europe. In doing so, he transformed – and perhaps even sublimated – his private grief into an act of public mourning that expressed his ethical conviction that an artist's responsibility is to give a voice to the victims of violence and brutality.

Shostakovich's ability to write music as powerful as his second trio whilst staying within the bounds of Soviet cultural politics has given rise to a long and at times acrimonious debate as to whether he was 'a loyal son of the Communist Party' or a closet dissident who smuggled secret programmes into even his most abstract scores. It certainly wasn't easy to adapt his style to the ever-changing demands of the state, yet his deep sense of professionalism meant that he usually found a way of speaking to the public whilst staying true to himself. Like all Soviet artists, he was bound by the dictates of Socialist Realism, with its cult of simple, accessible music designed to appeal to the masses whilst imparting the ideological truths of Marxism-Leninism.

Stylistically, Socialist Realism harked back to the world of the 19th Century – the epic novel in literature, the oil painting or monumental sculpture in the visual arts, and the symphony or string quartet in music. The legacy of Western European classical music had long been assimilated by Russian composers (Tchaikovsky's piano trio is a case in point), but what of musicians from the other Soviet republics, whose traditions looked and sounded rather different? To help them found a new Soviet canon, composers were sent from Moscow and Leningrad to the Caucasus and Central Asia. In turn, composers from these republics studied in European Russia, assimilating the lessons of Tchaikovsky and Rimsky-Korsakov, Shostakovich and Prokofiev, whilst somehow trying to preserve their own cultural identity. As a slogan of the time ran, this was art that was 'nationalist in form, socialist in content'.

Written in the final years of Stalinism, **Babadjanian's** Piano Trio in F sharp minor is very much a product of this particular artistic development. Born in 1921, Babadjanian first studied in his native Yerevan, before enrolling at the Moscow Conservatory in 1938. He returned to Armenia in 1950, where he is still revered as one of the founders of the country's modern classical music tradition. His trio nods to the Romantic legacy of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov, and his use of sonata form in its opening movement signals a debt to the Western tradition more generally. Yet its melismatic melodic lines and modally inflected harmonies suggest the equal importance of traditional Armenian music, and its rhythmic finale has all the foot-tapping élan of a folk dance. When it was premièred in the Small Hall of the Moscow Conservatory in 1952, it was instantly hailed as a masterpiece.

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