

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 1 July 2024
7.30pm

Julia Fischer violin
Daniel Müller-Schott cello
Yulianna Avdeeva piano

Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884)

Piano Trio in G minor Op. 15 (1855 rev. 1857)
*I. Moderato assai • II. Allegro, ma non
agitato • III. Finale. Presto*

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Notturmo in E flat D897 (?1828)

Interval

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Piano Trio in F minor Op. 65 (1883)
*I. Allegro ma non troppo • II. Allegretto
grazioso • III. Poco adagio • IV. Finale.
Allegro con brio*

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This evening's programme consists of three masterpieces of the piano trio repertoire, written by composers at the height of their powers. Before he came to write his piano trio, **Smetana's** reputation rested mainly on his prowess as a pianist (his growing fame in this department enabled him to set up his own Piano Institute in Prague in 1848), and his compositional output consisted mainly of collections of short piano pieces.

The Piano Institute did not prove to be an unqualified success, but during these years Smetana honed his skills as a composer, and at the same time enjoyed a brief period of happiness in his private life: in 1849 he married the young pianist Kateřina Kolářová, with whom he had been smitten for some time. Over the next few years the couple had four daughters, but then a series of tragedies struck. In 1854 their second child, Gabriela, died of tuberculosis; the following year, her older sister, Bedřiška, succumbed to scarlet fever. By the time of her death at the age of four, Bedřiška was already showing evidence of exceptional musical gifts, and Smetana was devastated by her loss.

In the composer's own words, his piano trio was intended as a memorial to 'our eldest child Bedřiška, whose rare musical talent gave us such delight; she was snatched from us too soon'. The work is Smetana's first real masterpiece, in which technical assurance is matched by emotional profundity. The trio begins with a dramatic flourish – a rhetorically jagged violin solo – which could be heard as the composer railing against the cruel fate that had robbed him of his beloved daughter. The work's more tender passages (such as the lyrical second theme of the first movement, the first contrasting episode of the second movement and a recurring 'tranquillo' section in the *Finale*) reflect the joy that Bedřiška had brought her parents during her brief life. The opening of the *Finale*, an urgent tarantella, inevitably recalls Schubert's 'Erlkönig', in which the piano's relentless triplets conjure up the pounding of a horse's hooves as a desperate father seeks to carry his young son away from harm. Towards the end of the *Finale*, the melting 'tranquillo' theme is transformed into a funeral march, after which the hectic pace of the opening returns, though now with a sense of refusing to be crushed by adversity: the work ends in a defiant G major.

The genesis of **Schubert's** free-standing *Adagio in E flat* for piano trio (to which the title '*Notturmo*' was later attached by its first publisher) is something of a mystery. It was written within the last year or so of the composer's life, a period during which he also produced two complete piano trios, in E flat major and B flat major, and it may have originally been intended as the slow movement of one of them – most likely the latter. Unusually for Schubert, the

autograph is neither signed nor dated, and there are no clues to suggest why, if he did intend it to form part of a larger work, he ultimately discarded it. However, the *Adagio's* stylistic affinity with several other slow movements of works dating from the end of Schubert's life – notably the *Andante sostenuto* of his final piano sonata and the *Adagio* of the String Quintet in C – suggest that it dates from the same period. All these movements share an atmosphere of rapt contemplation and a sense of time standing still, though there is more than a hint of subdued drama lurking just below the apparently unruffled surface of the music.

There has been some speculation over whether the unusually dark and brooding tone of **Dvořák's** Piano Trio in F minor was inspired principally by a tragic event in the composer's personal life (his mother died just a few months before he embarked on the work), or if it was due more to his need to convince a wider public that he was a serious composer worthy to stand alongside European contemporaries such as his friend and mentor Brahms. Of course, the two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive: it is quite possible that his mother's death provided the initial impetus for the composition of the work and influenced its sombre colouring, and that the seriousness of Dvořák's approach to structure and thematic development was dictated by an urge to show that he was capable of producing more substantial pieces than the charming folk-inflected songs and dances for which he had become known. By the early 1880s, Dvořák was aware of having reached a crossroads in his career, and faced the quandary of whether to continue to write music in the vein of the *Moravian Duets* and *Slavonic Dances* that had made his name during the previous decade, or to try to establish himself as a composer of more ambitious works.

The hushed yet dramatic opening of the trio was almost certainly intended to pay tribute to Brahms's Piano Quintet in F minor of 1864. Not only are the two works in the same key, but both also begin with an earnestly questioning theme played in octaves. This theme sets the tone for the rest of the work: instead of the spontaneous zest for life that had until then been characteristic of Dvořák's music, the dominant mood of the F minor trio is one of unease and defiance. However, this is not to say that the work lacks the composer's trademark melodic flair or rhythmic vigour. Far from it: few passages in the entire chamber music literature can rival the exquisitely soaring melodies of the slow movement, and the rhythms of the *Allegretto grazioso* and the finale are every bit as infectious as those of the *Slavonic Dances*.

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