

# WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 27 September 2025  
7.30pm

## Gould Piano Trio

Lucy Gould violin  
Richard Lester cello  
Benjamin Frith piano

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor Op. 92 (1892)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Allegretto •  
III. Andante con moto • IV. Grazioso, poco allegro •  
V. Allegro*

*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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It is not often that composers of the same generation have friendly relations, let alone admire each other's music. But when Saint-Saëns came to Moscow on tour, in 1875, Tchaikovsky attended one of the concerts, spoke to him afterwards, and the pair quickly formed a friendship. Saint-Saëns was a little older, by five years, and his career had advanced much further than Tchaikovsky's at that point. Tchaikovsky appreciated his new friend's 'talent for combining the grace and elegance of the French school with the seriousness and depth of the great German composers', a quality he hoped to cultivate in his own music. The two composers were well matched in their witty repartee, and on one occasion, they improvised an absurd 'ballet', with Tchaikovsky as Pygmalion, and Saint-Saëns the statue, while a pianist friend, Nikolai Rubinstein, provided the music.

They continued to take an interest in each other's music, but Tchaikovsky became increasingly distant. When Saint-Saëns wrote to say that he could arrange for performances of his friend's music in Paris, Tchaikovsky was deliberately uncooperative, so that the concerts did not materialise – he did not want to accept any favours that would cast him as the protégé of another composer. He also confessed to a friend at the time that 'In my heart of hearts, I consider myself to be a *whole Alpine peak* above his level.' When Saint-Saëns visited Russia again in 1887, he went to see *Eugene Onegin* and praised it effusively, whereas Tchaikovsky did not attend the concerts of his former friends, which were poorly attended. They finally met again in 1893, while receiving the same honours in Cambridge, but now there was no doubt that Tchaikovsky had seniority.

**Saint-Saëns** outlived Tchaikovsky by almost three decades, and there were many peaks and troughs in his lengthy career, but his enthusiasm for composition never faded. 'I write two pages of music a day. I scrape, file and chisel; that is true happiness. It is the way I began and it is how I want to finish', as he wrote during work on his Piano Trio No. 2 (1892). The Trio immediately commands the listener's attention with a turbulent theme in the strings, accompanied by an avalanche of piano chords across the keyboard. The initial motif seems to be derived from Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio (discussed below). Saint-Saëns was still on his annual holiday in Algiers when Tchaikovsky's trio was premièred in Paris in May 1889, but he was able to study the score, and was impressed by the main theme, which returns at the end of the trio. The equivalent theme in Saint-Saëns is confined to the first movement, which it dominates. Saint-Saëns punningly described the movement as 'black with notes and black in mood', and the pages are indeed dense with the piano's swirling figurations.

There are five movements in all: three shorter middle movements are framed by two weightier movements.

The second movement is in 5/8, and it exploits the unusual metre to the full (Tchaikovsky had not yet written the famous 5/4 'waltz' of his Sixth Symphony). The third movement harks back to Schumann's intimate and lyrical character pieces, although the lovely theme outdoes the earlier composer in its wayward journey through distant keys. The fourth movement is a charming salon waltz. The finale must balance the first movement, and Saint-Saëns turns to polyphony for the purpose. The earnest main theme is first heard in unison, but it is designed to accommodate imitation and fugal elaborations. At one point, the piano imitates a mighty organ pedal, as if Saint-Saëns imagined himself back in the organ loft of the Madeleine in Paris. The closing bars also return to an emphatic organ-like unison across the three instruments, as if all the stops had been pulled out.

**Tchaikovsky's** Trio ('In memory of a great artist', 1882), summons up still more grandeur, through its greater length and especially through the imposing, concerto-like piano part. The trio's subtitle refers to Nikolai Rubinstein, the founder of the Moscow Conservatoire, a remarkable pianist, and also Tchaikovsky's close friend and mentor (we encountered him earlier in a light-hearted context). Tchaikovsky was deeply affected by the sudden demise of Rubinstein, at the age of only 45. The opening theme is a heartfelt elegy, but the notes of sorrow and protest shift to heroic affirmation, as if in recognition of the remarkable achievements the dedicatee had packed into his short life. Tchaikovsky skilfully reinterprets a plaintive three-note motif, injecting it with vigour. But the elegy returns, transformed into a kind of funeral march, with sombre piano chords, the melody in the violin, and expressive, sobbing figures in the cello. In its complexity of form and its wide spectrum of emotions, the first movement resembles a symphonic poem, and Tchaikovsky even worried that he was effectively arranging an orchestral conception for piano trio.

The second, and final movement is a set of variations, and in compensation for the symphonic character of its predecessor, this movement exults in a range of authentic chamber-music textures. The theme is simple: classical, but with a tinge of Russian folksong, with nothing to alert the listener to the stunning diversity of the variations that follow. There is a scherzo, a chorale, a waltz, a fugue, a mazurka, and several other genres, following Beethoven's reconception of the form, which allowed each variation to have its own key, tempo and style. But just as the variations seem to reach a final peak of brilliance and vitality, the music is brutally undercut by the funereal version of the first movement's main theme, in a shattering dramatic stroke.

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