

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 29 December 2021 7.30pm

## Gould Piano Trio

Richard Lester cello

Benjamin Frith piano

Lucy Gould violin



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

**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

**Dmitry Shostakovich** (1906-1975)

Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor Op. 67 (1944)

*I. Andante - Moderato • II. Allegro non troppo • III. Largo • IV. Allegretto*

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**Mozart's** fortunes took a downturn in 1788, not least because Emperor Joseph II's rash declaration of war on the Turks meant that many of his aristocratic supporters disappeared to their regiments or their country estates. Yet the summer and early autumn, especially, were artistically prolific, with the composition of the last three symphonies - intended for concerts which may or may not have taken place - and three piano trios (K542, 548 and 564) that brought Mozart much-needed income at a time when his expenditure outran his earnings.

Dated 22 June 1788, the E major Trio, K542 - Mozart's only multi-movement work in that key - is the most poetic and, it's tempting to add, personal of his trios. It is no surprise to learn that it was a favourite of Chopin's. Beginning with a chromatically drooping theme for piano, the first movement combines wistful lyricism with an exhilarating harmonic range. The second theme begins in the expected key of B major, then plunges via G major to the remoteness of G minor - a thrilling moment. In the central development Mozart becomes mesmerised by a two-note motif from the main theme, working it in imitative dialogue before the piano embarks on a bout of concerto-style virtuosity.

The *Andante*, in A major, is a pastoral gavotte, with a plaintive, rather Schubertian central episode in A minor based on the same theme. Among the music's delights are the nonchalant imitations between strings and piano, and the stinging harmonic twist at the end of the theme. The rondo finale alternates melodies of limpid grace with flights of virtuoso display for piano and (occasionally) violin: a reminder that Mozart himself took the piano part in his trios at Viennese soirees. The hitherto subordinate cello asserts its equality in the quickfire dialogues of the central episode, and then cheekily has the very last word.

Completed in April 1845, when the 36-year-old composer was already in weakening health, **Mendelssohn's** C minor Piano Trio has never been as popular as his D minor Trio, perhaps because it lacks the earlier work's instant melodic appeal. Yet it is at least as fine as its companion, and one of several late Mendelssohn works (the Violin Concerto and the F minor Quartet Op. 80 are others) that refutes the notion that his genius declined irredeemably after the brilliance of youth.

From its smouldering, swirling opening theme, intoned by the piano in bare octaves over a deep cello pedal, the first movement is one of the most impassioned and tightly knit that Mendelssohn ever wrote. A fervent contrasting theme surges in *fortissimo* out of the first climax before subsiding in lyrical meditation. Crowning the movement is coda that begins in Brahmsian mystery and ends in Beethovenian vehemence, with strings playing the opening theme at half speed in counterpoint with the piano.

After this high-pressure drama the central movements, both examples of familiar Mendelssohnian types, provide necessary relief. The *Andante* is a dreamy song-without-words that suggests a gently gliding barcarolle. Animated by darting, flickering string-keyboard

exchanges, the third movement is the last of the 'fairy' scherzos that Mendelssohn first made his own in the Octet. Its gossamer textures are constantly enlivened by his contrapuntal sleight-of-hand; and like all fairy scherzos worth the name, it vanishes into the ether. With some understatement, Mendelssohn informed his sister Fanny that this scherzo was 'rather fiendish to play'.

Fusing ancient and modern, the *Finale* is a reminder that Mendelssohn was a leading figure in the 19th-century Bach revival. Initiated by an angular cello theme that sounds rather like a Bachian gigue, it effortlessly integrates a serene chorale melody (based on two traditional Lutheran hymns) into the turbulent musical narrative. In the C major coda Mendelssohn combines the gigue and the chorale, thundered out by the strings against piano tremolos, to create a majestic, orchestral-style apotheosis.

**Shostakovich** had begun to sketch his second piano trio when he heard of the sudden death of his friend, the musicologist Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky, aged just 41, on 1 February 1944. Overwhelmed by the loss of his closest musical confidant, he resolved to dedicate the trio, one of his bleakest works, to Sollertinsky's memory.

The unforgettable slow introduction is a quintessentially Russian lament, with eerily whistling cello harmonics answered by the deep, dolorous violin. Fragments of the introduction, tossed between the three instruments, reappear in the faster music (*Moderato*) that follows. This begins lyrically, then becomes more disturbed as it proceeds. The second movement is a manic, dissonant parody of a scherzo, with more than a whiff of the circus and fairground. As so often in Shostakovich's scherzos, jokiness here seems to freeze into a mocking rictus. The *Largo* third movement is surely an elegy for Sollertinsky: a grief-laden passacaglia in which the strings, led by the violin, muse sorrowfully over six repetitions of the piano's stark chorale theme.

In the finale, following without a break, the focus shifts from the personal to the universal. While Shostakovich was working on the trio news emerged of the Soviet Army's liberation of Nazi concentration camps. Stories circulated in the Soviet press that SS guards at the Treblinka and Majdanek death camps had forced Jewish prisoners to dig their own graves and dance upon them. The finale is Shostakovich's response to these horrors, progressively distorting its Klezmer-style themes (one of which reappears in the second movement of his String Quartet No. 8) in a grotesque dance of death. After a savage climax the music breaks off for agonised reminiscences of the first movement and passacaglia, before finally subsiding with the spectral high harmonics that had opened the trio.

At the Moscow première, on 14 November 1944, Shostakovich himself played the piano part alongside the violinist Dmitri Tsyganov and cellist Sergei Shirinsky. By all accounts the audience was profoundly moved. Not so Soviet officialdom, which denounced the trio's pessimism and forbade further performances.

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