

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 3 May 2023
7.30pm



Supported by the Sir Jack Lyons Charitable Trust

Boris Giltburg piano
Veronika Jarůšková violin
Peter Jarůšek cello

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

Interval

Piano Trio in E minor Op. 90 'Dumky' (1890-1)

I. Lento maestoso – Allegro quasi doppio movimento

II. Poco adagio – Vivace non troppo

III. Andante – Vivace non troppo

IV. Andante moderato – Allegretto scherzando

V. Allegro – Meno mosso

VI. Lento maestoso – Vivace



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It's an old but never-ending debate: the extent to which a composer's work is affected by, or an expression of, personal circumstances. In the case of **Antonín Dvořák's** Third Piano Trio there seems to be an obvious explanation for its heightened emotion and (in all senses) seriousness by comparison with his recent compositions. He began work on the new trio six weeks after the death of his mother, which occurred on 15 December 1882. She had been in her early 60s. Antonín was one of 14 children she had given birth to, only eight of whom had survived infancy.

There is, however, no documentary evidence that the composer intended the Trio to be a memorial to his mother, let alone an outpouring of grief. Nor is there any explicit connection to an often-cited 'inner battle' between his instinctive musical nationalism and pressure from friends to adopt a more broadly 'European' style. Taken to its extreme, this theory casts the Trio as three movements in emulation of Dvořák's German mentor, Johannes Brahms, followed by a 'Slavonic' *Finale* that declares a determination to follow an independent, Bohemian path. All very neat, and if you set out to hear that in the music, you might possibly succeed – but it's a thoroughly speculative interpretation.

The Trio was finished within a couple of months, and was first performed in October 1883 in the central Bohemian city of Mladá Boleslav, with the composer playing piano. Other performances soon followed, and in February 1884 the influential critic Eduard Hanslick declared, 'It shows us that the composer has attained the summit of his career.'

The first movement invests a large-scale sonata structure with a wealth of themes and an ever-changing range of emotions. The plasticity of mood is mirrored in the capacity of the melodies and motifs to modify and evolve: Dvořák would have been aware of the work of his 'progressive' contemporaries such as Liszt and Wagner and their experiments with 'symphonic metamorphosis', though their supposed antithesis, Brahms, was just as adept at turning one theme into another. By the same token one could describe the choice of a through-composed *Allegretto grazioso* instead of a scherzo as a typically Brahmsian touch – or point to its kinship to the *furiant* dance form so symbolically characteristic of Dvořák's homeland.

If any movement can be characterised as an elegy for the recently departed Anna Dvořáková it is the *Poco adagio*, heartfelt, tenderly reflective, but with the anguish of loss surfacing briefly in the central section. Yet such feelings are common to all humanity, which is why the movement strikes a deep chord even if we have no knowledge of any background story. And surely the *Finale* is no rejection of a 'Viennese' or 'international' style. Rather,

like all four movements, it demonstrates that the unashamedly Bohemian Antonín Dvořák has a thorough command of the internationally understood musical language of his day, and possesses an individual voice that deserves to be heard.

The encouragement that Dvořák received from Brahms was crucial to his career success outside his native Czech lands. It is not surprising that, from his Vienna base, Brahms tried to guide Dvořák towards Teutonic symphonism and sonata form. For Dvořák, as a proud Bohemian in an age of political and artistic nationalism, the musical idioms of his native land were part of his very being. So there must have been tensions within him, even if the supposed 'crisis' preceding composition of the Op. 65 Trio is something of an exaggeration.

The 'Dumky' Piano Trio dates from 1891, the year before Dvořák left Prague for New York, where he would head up the newly established National Conservatory of Music. He caused controversy on his arrival by suggesting that the United States should base its own national style of music on that of Native Americans and the plantation songs of African Americans. Other issues aside, he was using the freedom of leaving the Old World to nail his colours to the mast as a champion of national rather than international art.

That mindset already informs the Piano Trio Op. 90. Although it appears to have the outline of a fairly conventional four-movement chamber work, its structure is actually quite different. The 'first movement' is not a continuous structure, but a sequence of three *dumkas*. Each of the remaining three movements is another *dumka*. And the Trio does not follow a conventional tonal plan. The home keys of the six *dumkas* are, respectively, E minor, C sharp minor, A major, D minor, E flat major and C minor.

So, what is a *dumka*? It has its origins in a melancholic Ukrainian song-form. The Bohemian version that Dvořák pioneered alternates the original slow lament with a contrasting lively section of a highly rhythmical nature.

While working on the Trio, the composer told a friend that 'It will be both happy and sad. At times it will resemble a sombre song, elsewhere a jolly dance; but taken as a whole it will be light in style or, to put it another way, of a popular nature, so that it should appeal to highbrow and lowbrow listeners.' Indeed, it proved a great hit with audiences, and Dvořák performed it many times on a farewell concert tour of Bohemia and Moravia before sailing to the New World.

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