

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 6 January 2024
7.30pm

Smetana Trio

Josef Suk (1874-1935)

Piano Trio in C minor Op. 2
I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegro assai

Vítězslav Novák (1870-1949)

Piano Trio No. 2 Op. 27 'Quasi una ballata' (1902)

Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959)

Piano Trio No. 2 in D minor
I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Allegro

Interval

Anton Arensky (1861-1906)

Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor Op. 32 (1894)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto
II. Elegia. Adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro non troppo*



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A distinctly elegiac vein permeates all the works in this evening's concert of Slavonic piano trios (three Czech and one Russian). Slavonic melancholy was a mood much in vogue in Central Europe at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, as can be heard in the two pieces with which the programme begins, both written by pupils of the great Czech master Dvořák. **Suk's** Piano Trio in C minor was begun when he was only 15 and was studying composition with Karel Stecker, a colleague of Dvořák's at the Prague Conservatory. The first draft of the work – which arose out of chamber music evenings at which Suk played piano trios with friends and then resolved to try his hand at writing his own – was finished in February 1889. A performance of the original four-movement version of the trio at the Conservatory in January 1891 led to Suk being recommended for a place in Dvořák's composition master class. The piece was then submitted to Dvořák's critical scrutiny, after which the short scherzo that originally formed the third movement was dropped. By the end of 1891, the work had reached its definitive form. The Trio is decidedly Romantic in tone and exhibits in abundance the Slavonic lyricism that was to be such a characteristic feature of Suk's music for the next decade or so.

Unlike the more naturally gifted Suk – who was Dvořák's favourite pupil and later also became his son-in-law – his fellow student **Novák** initially struggled to find his own voice as a composer, and was for many years plagued with self-doubt. After graduating from the Conservatory in 1896, Novák travelled to eastern Moravia and Slovakia and immersed himself in the folk music of these regions, which from then on left a profound mark on his own music. Unfortunately, among certain circles in Prague, to be influenced by folk music was seen as being incompatible with having a progressive artistic outlook, and Novák was branded a reactionary by those who interpreted such influence as a sign of cultural backwardness. Always extremely sensitive to any kind of criticism, Novák was plunged into a deep depression, which he referred to in his autobiography as 'the blackest Baudelairean pessimism'. Music was still a source of solace, and with its help he succeeded in extricating himself from the depths of despair, though it seems that work on the Second Piano Trio – in which the influence of Moravian folk music is clearly in evidence – came perilously close to triggering a relapse ('My ancient wounds reopened throughout its composition', he later recalled).

Martinů's Second Piano Trio also came after a period of depression in the composer's life. In the second half of the 1940s, Martinů was reduced to despair by a particularly unfortunate sequence of events. The first of these was a fall from a balcony in 1946 that left him with a serious head injury, which

meant his long-cherished ambition to return to Europe from the United States (where he had lived since fleeing war-torn Europe in 1941) had to be put on hold, and he was forced to take an extended break from composition. His dream of finally returning to his homeland (which he had left in 1923) was dealt a further blow by the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948. In a cruel twist of fate, Zdeněk Nejedlý, the Marxist historian and ideologue who had long been Novák's chief critic, was appointed Minister of Culture and Education after the Communist coup, thus creating an even more hostile environment for Martinů, who as a former pupil of Suk was seen as the heir to the Dvořák tradition in Czech music and was therefore considered to be irredeemably bourgeois and reactionary by the Nejedlý camp.

Despite continuing ill health and serious concerns over his future, Martinů slowly recovered his urge to compose, and in the late 1940s he gradually emerged from his depression via a series of chamber works. The Second Piano Trio shows that by 1950, his creative powers had been fully restored. Like the Novák trio, Martinů's work also begins in a sombre D minor, but the mood is soon lightened by his characteristic 'sprung' rhythms and open textures. Though undeniably one of his more serious works, with many passages – especially in the elegiac slow movement – tinged with almost unbearable nostalgia, the sheer mellifluousness of the melodic writing and the vitality generated by the syncopated rhythms ensure that it never ceases to delight, and the final page exudes irrepressible gaiety.

The third of the works in this evening's programme to be written in the key of D minor, **Arensky's** First Piano Trio was dedicated to the memory of the legendary Russian cellist Karl Davydov (1838-1889), and all the movements apart from the exuberant scherzo are deeply elegiac in tone. It forms part of a well-established tradition of Russian elegiac piano trios: Tchaikovsky's epic Piano Trio in A minor (1882) was composed as a memorial to the pianist Nikolay Rubinstein, and Rachmaninov dedicated his Second Trio *élégiacque* (1893) to the memory of Tchaikovsky himself. Davydov – who was also much admired by Tchaikovsky – was regarded as the founder of the Russian school of cello playing, and Arensky pays tribute to his key role in Russian music by giving the cello a much more prominent role than was typically the case in piano trios – it introduces many of the principal themes and often puts the violin part in the shade. And nowhere does it have a more vital role than in the profoundly moving *Elegia* that constitutes the heart and soul of the work.

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