WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 9 July 2023
7.30pm

Classiche For*me* at Wigmore Hall

Beatrice Rana piano
Stephen Waarts violin
Ludovica Rana cello
Massimo Spada piano

Anton Arensky (1861-1906)

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

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Symphonic Dances Op. 45 for 2 pianos (1940)
I. Non allegro • II. Andante con moto. Tempo di valse • III. Lento assai - Allegro vivace

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As a genre, the Russian piano trio has long been associated with memory and mourning. This tradition goes back to Tchaikovsky, whose Piano Trio in A minor Op. 50 (1882) – subtitled 'A la mémoire d'un grand artist' – was dedicated to the memory of his friend Nikolai Rubinstein, who died in March 1881. When Tchaikovsky himself died suddenly and unexpectedly in the autumn of 1893, the young Rachmaninov responded with his second *Trio élégiaque*, Op. 9, likewise dedicated 'to the memory of a great artist'. In the 20th Century, Shostakovich turned to the trio to express the grief he felt for Ivan Sollertinsky, whose death in February 1944 robbed him of a faithful friend and artistic mentor.

The Piano Trio No. 1 in D minor Op. 32 by **Arensky** is a further example of this elegiac tradition. Written in 1894, it is dedicated to the memory of the great cellist Karl Davydov, who had died in 1889. Davydov had been director of the St Petersburg Conservatory from 1878 to 1886, during which time Arensky had studied with Rimsky-Korsakov. Arensky then moved to the Moscow Conservatory, where he befriended Tchaikovsky and taught a new generation of composers, including Rachmaninov and Skryabin. Whilst his trio explicitly honours Davydov, it equally attests to the close personal and creative relationships that sustained him in his adopted city. It also demonstrates how much Russian composers had learned from their European counterparts. It can be tempting to see the history of Russian music as the search for some kind of nationalist essence, yet Arensky's trio betrays very audible echoes of the works of Mendelssohn and Schumann, as well as occasional affinities with the more modern sound world of Fauré.

The opening *Allegro moderato* is a substantial and beautifully proportioned sonata-form movement that shows Arensky's command of classical form and motivic development. Here, grief has been channelled into reflective remembrance, with the long, singing lines in the cello part conveying something of Davydov's personality and artistry. Then comes a genial, dance-like *Scherzo*, with more than a whiff of the salon. The *Adagio* third movement – described by Arensky as an '*Elegia*' – bears the trio's emotional weight. If the swaying rhythm of the opening feels like a subdued and courtly funeral march, then its central section evokes nostalgic memories of happier times. The *Finale* gathers up themes heard in the previous three movements, before hurtling to a brisk and powerful conclusion that hints at the ineluctability of human mortality. Arensky would himself die in 1906, aged just 44, after a short life ravaged by alcohol and gambling debts.

One of Arensky's pupils at the Moscow Conservatory had been **Rachmaninov**, who built on his teacher's example to fashion a musical language that may have had Romantic roots, but which also had a bracing sense of modernity too. This is particularly the case when it comes to his final numbered opus, the *Symphonic Dances*, composed on Long Island in 1940. Rachmaninov had fled war-torn Europe the previous year, abandoning the austerely beautiful Bauhaus villa he had had built on the banks of Lake Lucerne, just as he had previously been forced to leave his country estate at Ivanovka in the wake of the October Revolution in 1917.

There can be no doubting the profound sense of loss that characterised Rachmaninov's life in emigration, and there is certainly plenty of nostalgia and retrospection about the *Symphonic Dances*. He had originally thought of calling his new work *Fantastic Dances*, and their atmosphere is suitably brooding and fatalistic. There are allusions to similar dances of death by Liszt, Berlioz and Saint-Saëns, and Rachmaninov incorporated quotations from two of his own pre-revolutionary works – the unpublished and (then) unknown First Symphony (1897), and the *All-Night Vigil* (1915) – as if looking back on the often turbulent course of his life and even fashioning his own memorial. He also made powerful use of the *Dies irae* chant from the Roman Catholic Mass for the dead, which he had cited so often before, and which now seemed more grimly appropriate than ever. Just as Ravel's *La valse* (1920) had conjured up the malevolence and destruction of the First World War, so too did Rachmaninov turn to dance in order to convey the violence and brutality that had been unleashed on the world in 1939. The *Symphonic Dances* stand alongside Dürer's grisly woodcuts, Goya's macabre prints or Musorgsky's haunting *Songs and Dances of Death* as a testament to the cruelty of which humans have proved themselves so tragically – and repeatedly – capable.

Rachmaninov had considered naming the dances 'Morning', 'Noon', and 'Night'. If this seems like an allusion to Oedipus's solution to the riddle of the Sphinx ('What walks on four feet in the morning, two in the afternoon and three at night?' – 'Man: as an infant, he crawls on all fours; as an adult, he walks on two legs and; in old age, he uses a walking stick'), then there is little sense of creative fatigue about the *Symphonic Dances*. Alongside echoes of Russian orthodox chant, there are hints of American jazz, and he inscribed the end of the score with a triumphant 'Alleluia', a vindication of a life devoted to art, and – perhaps – a belief that peace might eventually prevail? The version of the *Symphonic Dances* that was premièred by the Philadelphia Orchestra in January 1941 shows Rachmaninov's technicolour mastery of instrumental sonority. The version for two pianos is starker and more acerbic, revealing the skeletal structure underneath its fleshly surface. We can only imagine the performance that Rachmaninov gave with Vladimir Horowitz at a private party at his home in Beverly Hills in August 1942, where he would die some seven months later, just shy of his 70th birthday.