

Joaquín Turina. (1882-1949)

Piano Trio No 2 in B Minor, Op 76

Lento – Allegro molto moderato

Molto vivace

Lento – Andante mosso – Allegretto

Sergei Rachmaninoff. (1873-1943)

Piano Trio No 2 in D Minor (Trio Élégiaque), Op. 9

“To the Memory of a Great Artist”

Moderato – Allegro moderato

Quasi Variazione

Allegro risoluto

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky. (1840-1893)

Piano Trio in A Minor, Op. 50

In Memory of a Great Artist (Nikolai Rubinstein, 1835-1881)

Pezzo elegaico. Moderato assai — Allegro giusto

Theme and Variations. [Theme and 11 variations]

Final Variation and Coda

Joaquín Turina. Piano Trio No 2 in B Minor, Op 76 (1933)

No Spanish composer devoted more energy to chamber music than Turina. Although he spent only his student days (1905-1914) in Paris and spent the rest of his life in Spain, his chamber music is Continental rather than atmospherically Spanish. Turina studied with Vincent d'Indy, and knew both Debussy and Ravel. The Polish virtuoso Moritz Moszkowski was his piano teacher.

The French emphasis on melody and beauty of surface and texture carries into this handsome, short Piano Trio, which uses the “cyclic” technique used by Franck and other French composers. In keeping with the world of French impression, the composer’s working title for the work was originally “Three Nocturnes.” The exquisite first movement themes are stated, elaborated, stated again, but not subjected to the torment of development.

The second movement is in a Spanish-inflected 5/8 metre, has chunky, modal chords for the piano with the two strings scurrying over it – like a glimpse into a tavern full of dancers, it is there and gone.

The finale has shifting moods, opening with the cello and some warning dark chords on the piano, with the main theme stated again at triple speed.

Rachmaninoff: Piano Trio No 2 in D Minor (Trio Élégiaque), Op. 9 (1893-94) “To the Memory of a Great Artist” (1893-94)

Upon hearing of the death of his friend and mentor Tchaikovsky in October 1893, the 20-year-old Sergei Rachmaninoff immediately began composing his Trio Élégiaque, Op 9. In a mere six weeks, the work was completed, and Rachmaninoff played the piano part in its premiere in January 1894. Since Tchaikovsky had composed his own piano trio a few years earlier in memory of *his* mentor and friend Nikolai Rubinstein, Rachmaninoff was following in a grand tradition of musical elegy and dedicated his work “To the Memory of a Great Artist.” Inevitable revisions followed the first performance and first publication (1907), but the revised version was not published until 1950, after Rachmaninoff’s death.

The 20-minute opening movement, which begins *Moderato*, has been described as episodic and not in sonata form at all, but if we think of this as a sonata-form movement with a funeral in the middle, it is not that far from tradition. The movement’s introduction begins with a funereal tread in the piano,

halting chords punctuated with chromatic descending eighth-notes. The violin and cello spin out a somber and elegiac theme over this relentless accompaniment, leading up to an agitated section with strings sounding together against the piano.

A little cello soliloquy is the bridge passage to the actual first theme. You will recognize its arrival as the violin plays pizzicato for several measures. The following episodes put the violin and cello into full play with double-stopping and rapid flight at full volume over a not-to-be-suppressed piano.

Since an elegy needs to be as much a happy memory of the departed as a lament, the *Meno mosso* section that follows soon after, presents a second theme in which we hear, already in blossom, the mature sound of Rachmaninoff's piano concertos. It is voluptuous music, and we can enjoy it all the more because the sound world it inhabits is already well known to us.

After this, Rachmaninoff dutifully gets everyone busy with what sounds like a development section: shorter phrases passed back and forth, worked against another, the good Russian student trying to please his teachers by saying, "Russians can do this. You don't have to be a German..."

But Rachmaninoff has a better idea. In an extended episode that makes us forget all about development-busywork, we get an eerie miracle: muted strings over the piano in a miniature tone poem. It is the river Neva with its icy, jet black waters, where Tchaikovsky once tried to drown himself. It is, perhaps, the ghost of the old countess wandering the streets, from Tchaikovsky's *Queen of Spades*. It is a solitary mourner, and as this fades away, we are brought back from this chilling reverie by the violin, back to reality, playing on the G string.

Agitated passages return, as if we are swirled back into the development section again. But this is not to be – this is not where the composer's heart is. After a cello solo, the original introductory theme of the movement returns. The whole movement winds down, fading away like a funeral procession that has passed into a distant graveyard. The low, low cello note seems to say, "Alone, alone."

The middle movement of the Trio emulates what Tchaikovsky did in his own great Trio: a set of variations on an original theme. The piano states the theme, and there are eight variations. The theme is chorale-like, but not simple, with leading inner voices: it is actually the main theme of Rachmaninoff's early symphonic poem, *The Rock*, which Tchaikovsky had agreed to conduct that winter of 1894. The most notable variations are the second, for piano alone, with six huge keyboard-spanning rolling chords, sounding almost like late Liszt. The third variation takes off like Rimsky's bumblebee, a Mendelssohnian scherzo, fairy music. The fifth variation parallels a similar muted-strings, sad variation in the Tchaikovsky Trio, and here, the falling-eighth notes of the Trio's opening theme appear as an undercurrent. Music does not get sadder than this. The last three variations are played continuously, and, near the end, there are 12 bars where cello and piano repeat the theme slowly and wistfully, with great harp-like broken chords that seem to presage the doomed world of Rachmaninoff's First Symphony, to be finished two years later. At the very end of the variations, both strings play double-stopped, making the two players sound like a string quartet.

In the finale, marked *Allegro risoluto*, the piano becomes more and more assertive. In imitation of the cyclic form Tchaikovsky used in his Trio, in effect a reminder of he-to-whom the work is dedicated, Rachmaninoff brings back the elegiac theme from the first movement. In Tchaikovsky's work, the music, after a cataclysm of grief, fades away with quotations from the Chopin Funeral March. The final pages of Rachmaninoff's Trio also involve a fading-away, and there is a three-bar solo for piano, repeated twice, near the end. "Just music," I thought – and then the thunderbolt hit me: it is a direct quotation from the Russian Orthodox Funeral Chant, "May his memory be eternal." Tchaikovsky quoted it at the end of his opera *The Queen of Spades* and you can hear it sung at the burial scene at the beginning of the film of *Doctor Zhivago*. It is done in such a muted and unemphatic way that most non-Slavs would miss it, but there it is, clear as a bell: *Vychnaya pamyat'*.

Tchaikovsky. Piano Trio in A Minor, Op 50 (1881-82) In Memory of a Great Artist (1881-82)

Wintering in Italy in 1881, Tchaikovsky interrupted work on his gloomiest opera, *Mazeppa*, to begin work on his Piano Trio, a work framed in elegy if not tragedy. Cast as a memorial for his mentor and friend Nikolai Rubinstein, the Trio was a formal challenge to Tchaikovsky, undertaken with many self-doubts and reservations.

Tchaikovsky had earlier told his patroness, Madame von Meck, of his detestation of the piano trio genre. He felt that the piano, “king of instruments,” just could not blend with violin and cello, and feared that the result of any effort of his in the genre would be a disaster. Yet despite his dislike and dread, like a man possessed by the Imp of the Perverse, Tchaikovsky decided that a stately, funereal Trio would be the best memorial for his beloved friend, a work to be played for a small group of elect listeners.

Nikolai Rubinstein, not to be confused with his brother, the famed pianist-composer Anton Rubinstein, was a colossal figure in his own right: founder of the Moscow Conservatory where Tchaikovsky taught, and a pianist who could “produce sounds of terrible force” and splinter pianos. Like Liszt, Nikolai Rubinstein always toured with a spare piano on hand in case he destroyed the one beneath his fingers. It should be no surprise, then, that Tchaikovsky’s Trio in honor of this man calls for virtuoso powers. Indeed, this work is reputed to be harder to play than the composer’s concertos (except maybe the cadenzas), and the piano is seldom silent, as suited the stolid and large-spirited Rubinstein.

Tchaikovsky had long forgiven Rubinstein one of the greatest insults in the history of Russian music: a decade earlier, Tchaikovsky had played his virgin First Piano Concerto to his mentor, who ridiculed it and declared it unplayable. Tchaikovsky published it exactly as written and Rubinstein finally came around and played it. The passage of the years, and many acts of generosity by Rubinstein for his many colleagues and students, made the incident a distant ache. Many artists would not have forgiven such a judgment, made insultingly in front of other artists. But Rubinstein had more than made up for his lapse with Tchaikovsky, and was ultimately one of the greatest Russian champions of the younger man’s work.

Russians spent a lot of time in Europe, to escape the winter weather. Rubinstein died in Paris of tuberculosis in March 1881; Tchaikovsky rushed to the scene from Italy but arrived too late to see his friend one last time. As Tchaikovsky rode back to Moscow, he discovered that the boarded-up lead coffin containing Rubinstein’s remains were in the baggage car of his train. Did the main, elegiac theme of this Trio come to him during the train ride? (It’s not hard to hear the rhythms of the train engine in those opening piano arpeggios...)

Why did Tchaikovsky have such trepidation about writing a trio? The composer needed no instruction in writing for the violin or cello: he had behind him his masterful Violin Concerto (Op. 35), and his three string quartets (Opp. 11, 22 and 30) -- the lattermost a funereal tapestry in E-Flat Minor. In his ballet music for *Swan Lake*, he had crafted haunting duos for violin and cello and a violin concerto in miniature. But even more significant was the long middle movement of his G Major Piano Concerto, Op. 44, an extended and masterful concertante movement for piano, violin and cello against the orchestra.

Part of Tchaikovsky’s phobia may have come from the dearth of Russian piano trios. There was one by Glinka, a minor production. Tchaikovsky would have known the Trios of Mozart and Beethoven but he really had no domestic models. He might also have seen Dvorak’s Trios, and those of Brahms (whose music he disliked). Doubtless he felt that he carried a tremendous artistic burden, that of establishing a “Russian manner” in the piano trio genre, and he knew that his work would be judged by German/Austrian standards.

The hardest part was starting, but then the Trio took on its own life. Tchaikovsky succeeded beyond his wildest expectations. His young pupil Sergei Taneyev introduced the work on the anniversary of Rubinstein’s death. Tchaikovsky made emendations and changes as a result of this performance, some at the suggestion of the performers. (Many of these “emendations” were reversed when the definitive Tchaikovsky edition was published). At the suggestion of the players, Tchaikovsky also introduced a

pause before the second movement's final (12th) variation, in effect turning it into a separate finale movement.

During his American tour a decade later, Tchaikovsky heard the work played at the Russian Embassy in Washington and at the Metropolitan Opera House in a long, all-Tchaikovsky concert. Among Russians, the Trio is beloved, viewed as one of his greatest "tragic" works, alongside *Romeo and Juliet* and the *Pathétique Symphony*. Clearly, this tells us that the work cannot be appreciated merely as an exercise in form, to be judged on whether or not he succeeded in the way Beethoven or Brahms succeeded in the genre. This is a programmatic work as well as a formal one. We can applaud Tchaikovsky's achievement as a composer, but we are also meant to feel, and to feel deeply.

The opening *Pezzo elegiaco*, at around 18 minutes, is as long as a symphonic first movement, and is organized in recognizable sonata form. Its opening theme is avowedly mournful, the tone throughout the movement serious, with tense rhythmic inflections and some jostling between major and minor tonalities. It is on this movement that Tchaikovsky expended his "studies," building his Russian battleship water-tight and without any flagging of melodic interest. The second subject is more Beethovenian, and lends itself to breaking up into motivic elements, giving Tchaikovsky what he needs for development and contrast. Although there is drama aplenty, the movement does not end with any grandiose "1812" or "Pathétique" gestures. It has the good manners to just let its grief fade away, dolce, the impression that of noble sentiment and Schubertian songfulness.

The second movement abandons any reference to the "sonata form" model. It consists of a theme and eleven variations. The theme, in E major, has an almost classical-era sound about it. Tchaikovsky loved Mozart and 18th-century music in general, and took delight in composing variations on "antique" themes. He also had an uncanny knack for variations. The story is told of Tchaikovsky's days as a music student, when he was given an overnight homework assignment of writing some variations on his teacher's original theme. Young Pyotr Ilyich came back in the morning with 125 variations in hand! The piano, alone, presents the E Major Theme. In Variation 1, the violin predominates; in Variation 2 the violin skitters over a cello statement of the theme. Variation 3 is a scherzoso offering all-pizzicato for the strings.

Now things begin to darken: Tchaikovsky slips into the relative minor (c#) for Variation 4, chords and octaves on the piano in counterpoint to a kind of two-part invention for violin and cello. It has the darkness of a Bach minor-key prelude.

Variation 5 is in C# Major, with violin and cello sustaining an open-fifth chord for eleven measures while the piano twitters in the coloratura register. The cello is left at the end, repeating an insistent C#, a kind of foot-stamping that leads directly into Variation 6, a fully-worked out waltz with lots of violin tremolos and very songful duo passages for the two stringed instruments. We are at a ball in Moscow or a salon in Paris, and all is well.

Variation 7 is a toccata of sorts for the piano, with heavy, forceful chords (finger-crunchers with eight notes apiece!), accompanied by appoggiaturas and double-stop chords on the strings. This is really a mood-setter for the gravitas of Variation 8, a very, very serious and academic Fugato. All the players get to be quite aggressive in statements and re-statements of the theme, its accents and wide-interval leaps characteristic of fast fugues. Tchaikovsky builds tension rather nicely with crescendi and sudden dynamic shifts. It must be fiendishly difficult to play. The fugue ends on a big double-stop E Major chord...

And now, a miracle. The string players put their mutes on. The piano hushes to play harp-like arpeggiated passages while the strings intone a new C-sharp minor variation, marked *lamentoso*. This truly is a lament, music of almost unbearable sadness and loss, darker even than the violin-cello duos in *Swan Lake*. This is music that cannot resolve: it can only pass, like grief. Tchaikovsky mercifully lets it subside, and uses the rolling chords of its conclusion to modulate into the faraway world of A Major, to

...

Variation 10, a Mazurka that sounds as though it came from Chopin's doomed fingers. The Mazurka, that lilting, gay-sad dance with one foot in the ballroom, the other in the grave. The piano sings alone; the exhausted strings are silent, but after a little cadenza the theme begins a second time, and the violin and cello enter, boisterously, bursting into pizzicati open chords over the piano. They have gotten over the grief; they have had a little vodka...

Variation 11 brings us back "home" to E Major, the theme restated in its most recognizable form, but enriched with cadential passages that hint that the end is near.

After a pause, the players introduce the "Variation Finale," actually a completely worked out final movement. Its detachment from the set of variations is intentional, marking this forceful and masculine *Allegro risoluto e con fuoco* as a Schumannesque movement with a "cyclic" reference to the early theme rather than an organic connection. Indeed this is the most "chamber-music"-like section of the Trio, a bustling, very Russian romp.

But now, more than six minutes into this delightful, busy music, something terrifying and unexpected happens. The piano is possessed. A dark voice seems to say, "You, sitting there, eating from your white china, drinking French wine and making conversation, speaking Russian to one, French to another, English to another! Flirting with someone at the next table, too! You with your Rondo Finale ideas, thinking you'll show up Brahms this time! Have you forgotten who is in the next car, dead, sealed up in his lead box, He who will never hear or play another note?" The A Minor lament from the first movement bursts into hearing, tragic, inconsolable. It is no longer possible to evade the full burden of death and loss. The strings intone the great lament again and then gradually subside. All that is left is for the pianist, a friend standing over an open grave, to mark the classic rhythmic figure of Chopin's Funeral March, fading, fading, fading to silence.

— Program notes by Brett Rutherford