

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Piano Trio No. 1 in c minor, "Poeme" Op. 8 (1923)

"Oh my God — Shostakovich first on the program! There's no way to sneak away!"

Now, now, gentle listener, relax. Not only have we learned to love and enjoy all 15 Shostakovich quartets without breaking out into hives, but many of us have come to realize that the tormented Russian composer is right up there with the greats. You *are* glad this isn't Hindemith, aren't you?

Tonight's Trio is the product of teenage enthusiasm and puppy love. Shostakovich was sixteen when he composed this work. Its sardonic touches reflect the young man's part-time employment as a pianist accompanying silent movies, and his attraction to radical voices in music. Soviet musicians eagerly awaited new scores of composers like Stravinsky (in exile and forbidden) or Hindemith. The purges of composers had not begun and experimentalism was rife in music, poetry, and drama. Shostakovich's flirtation with the avant garde would culminate in 1929 with his opera *The Nose*, probably the noisiest opera score ever.

The young composer had lost his father in 1922, and had spent part of 1923 in a sanatorium recovering from tuberculosis. A fellow patient, a 16-year-old girl named Tanya Gilvenko, became Shostakovich's Muse and love interest. The single-movement Piano Trio was written at this time, and its intensity doubtless reflects both the young Shostakovich's returning vitality and self-assurance, but also the young man's desire to make a powerful impression. A clever, forceful, testosterone-filled work was the order of the day, the musical equivalent of peacock feathers. It was good enough for the composer to submit it to Myaskovsky as part of his entrance exam to get into the Moscow Conservatory a year later. The Trio opens and closes with the same thematic material, but what comes between is in recognizable sonata form. The listener senses a Haydn-like wit, but with a grotesque exaggeration, in his asking the violinist to repeat the same note over and over again at the beginning of the movement. In roughly eight minutes of music, Shostakovich demonstrates a unity of mood, and a compositional mastery well beyond his years.

Leos Janacek (1854-1928)

String Quartet No. 2 ("Intimate Letters") (1928)

Andante — Con moto — Allegro

Adagio — Vivace

Moderato — Adagio — Allegro

Allegro — Andante — Adagio

A 74-year-old man in love with a younger — much, much younger — woman, a married woman no less — is usually the stuff of comedy or satire. Don Quixote, Falstaff and others of their ilk get a sound drubbing for their folly and the lady in question goes back to her husband. When the old man happens

to be a brilliant composer, we get another outcome altogether: searingly, achingly beautiful music that sublimates and transforms even the most absurd and inappropriate passions. Leos Janacek, after writing his beloved hundreds if not thousands of fervent and hopeless love letters, turned to his music to transcribe for wordless voices, the strings, the yearning and devotion words had failed to express fully.

Janacek wanted a viola d'amore instead of a traditional viola for his quartet, but this instruction was ignored then, and now. That rare instrument has been abandoned, and while it was still around, those who detested its timbre nicknamed it the "viola de manure." Not even a farm girl would be wooed by it, so we are better off with the stalwart viola, which gets enough grief as it is.

Janacek wrote of this work: "This is my first composition which sprang forth immediately from an emotional experience I had just lived through. Formerly I used to compose my memories. This work, my *Intimate Letters*, acquired shape in fire, the former ones in hot ashes only."

Frequent tempo changes make it a little difficult to tell where one movement ends and another begins. Since the entire work spans only a little more than 20 minutes, it is probably better to just relax and let the music work its charms. This work is modern but not atonal, intricately structured but not predictable, and delivers a strong emotional climax, even if it's not immediately discernible just how we got there. Janacek's melodic lines and motives, honed in the opera house, work because they are based on the speaking and singing voice, and what I finally hear in this music is a duet: the ardent, insistent lover and the protesting but equally amorous beloved. You might see the instruments smoke a little when it is all over.

Janacek heard this work only in rehearsal. He died suddenly in the summer of 1928. And yes, *she* was there. Her name was Kamila Stosslova, and Janacek's letters to her were published in 1990 and translated into English four years later. (*Intimate Letters*, translated by John Tryyell, Princeton University Press, 1994.) Eva Hoffman, reviewing the book in *The New York Times*, deflates the romance by describing Kamila thus: "She lived an entirely domestic existence; she wasn't interested in reading anything except pulp romances; despite Janacek's repeated pleas, she refused to attend performances of his music." Yet Janacek wrote to her: "I've nothing but success, vigor in my compositions. Where does that fellow get it from? A riddle . . . I'd so love to cry out, to raise you up, display you: 'Look, my dear beloved riddle of life!'"

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Quintet in F minor, Op. 34 (1862-1865)

Allegro non troppo — Poco sostenuto — Tempo I

Andante, un poco Adagio

Scherzo (Allegro)

Finale. Poco sostenuto — Allegro non troppo — Tempo I — Presto, non troppo

The Brahms F minor Piano Quintet may be the apex of 19th century chamber music with piano. Its sheer heft, its expansive, symphonic construction, and its melodic and rhythmic beauties make it one of those works you recognize instantly and always delight in hearing again. Yet Brahms himself worked and re-worked this piece. The notes remained the same, but the instruments would not stay put. It was a string quintet, then it was a sprawling piece for two pianos. This reticence, like a man who leaves home in his pajamas, re-emerges in his bathrobe, then emerges again in formal dress, is pure Brahms. Clara and Hermann Levi played the two-piano version in 1864, and Clara told Brahms: "It is not a sonata, but a work whose ideas you might — and must — scatter over an entire orchestra." The F Minor Quintet was Brahms' response to Clara's challenge.

The year 1865, when Brahms finished the scoring, was a stressed time for the composer. He had grown increasingly estranged from his platonic-beloved Clara Schumann, and she had sent him a hurt and hurtful rejoinder to his lack of understanding for her desire to enjoy her success as a concert pianist. She was at the peak of her career and had no interest in becoming Brahms' stay-at-home Muse. The year began sorrowfully with the death of Brahms' mother in Hamburg, which propelled him to commence work in earnest on what would become his *A German Requiem*. Brahms also saw his String Sextet in G refused two by publishers that year. It was at his summer retreat at Baden-Baden where he finished his Horn Trio, and probably worked further on the Piano Quintet.

Hard as it is for us to imagine, it took three years to arrange a performance of the Piano Quintet, which took place in Paris in 1868, a daring performance for all involved since the French were virulently anti-Brahms.

Brahms biographer Jan Swafford marks this work as one of the first extended works in which Brahms achieved a complete unity of feeling across all the movements. Swafford writes: "Of the subtleties composers aspire to and only occasionally manage to achieve over the course of long pieces, that unity of feeling — within emotional variety — is one of the most elusive. It has little to do with technique as such; it cannot be taught; can hardly be analyzed, only felt intuitively by composer and listener alike. For Brahms it began to happen, perhaps, with the F Minor Quintet. ... [T]he emotional intensity he achieved in it seems at times anguished, at times (in the scherzo) demonic, at times tragic. Yet the whole quintet remains a unified dramatic plot without becoming monochrome: one story." (Johannes Brahms: A Biography, 1997, Alfred A. Knopf., p. 326)

Long monographs could be devoted to the musical analysis of the Piano Quintet, but we shall have to content ourselves with a few words. The first movement, *Allegro non troppo*, is constructed in proper sonata form, with an opening theme in octaves — one of those melodies that turns upon itself and hooks instantly into your memory. As Brahms does in other works such as his Second Symphony, there is a three-note sequence in the melody (F-G-Ab) that repeats throughout all four movements and becomes a structural element. The listener grows to recognize the little half-step upward moves that mark this motif. Brahms, like Beethoven, uses tiny motivic cells for both harmonic and rhythmic purposes. The

development of the melodic material takes on a life of its own, and the barlines, for long stretches, don't have much to do with the working –out of the material. Although there are a couple of passages that seem a trifle labored or academic, most of this movement is thrilling and it is easy to understand Clara's demand for a full orchestral dress. This is big music, bigger than the printed score and almost too big for the forces employed.

The second movement, *Andante, un poco Adagio*, is nocturnal, lyrical. It reminds one of Beethoven's best and most elaborate slow symphonic movements, but it also has the slow and easy grace of Schubert about it.

The *Scherzo*, marked *Allegro*, has been called possessed or demonic. It is driven music, so passionate that it risks sounding like the work's finale. The little half-step motif is there both in melody, and in key changes a half-step apart from one another (a modulation that any composer will tell you is devilishly hard to pull off). This is masterful music, one of the finest of all Brahms fast movements.

After the riveting *Scherzo*, the last movement is puzzling. Many composers deliver roller-coaster rides for finales – faster, faster, louder, louder, ending with a bang. Instead, there is a slow, spooky introduction, so unexpected that you almost feel you had accidentally wandered into another room where another ensemble is playing. What does this have to do with what came before? A puzzle here, and perhaps the answer for the listener is simply to surrender to Brahms' rhapsodizing. He steps sideways, emotionally and musically. Brahms refuses to deliver the expected Romantic peroration from the tragic pathos of F Minor into the warm, white light of F Major (a device both Beethoven and Tchaikovsky use in their Fifth Symphonies). Is Brahms telling us that life is an F Minor affair, happy endings are a delusion, and we must take comfort from or make something of what we are dealt? Brahms accelerates to his coda without delivering a ray of false sunshine. In the final passages, the notes Ab-G-F bring the work to its final F Minor chord, and those three notes are the reverse of the F-G-Ab motif built into the first movement.

— *Program notes by Brett Rutherford*