

TUESDAY EVENING CONCERT SERIES PRESENTS
Benedetti-Elschenbroich-Grynyuk Trio
28 March 2023 at UVA's Old Cabell Hall
Program Notes by Laurie Shulman © 2022

Piano Trio No.2 in E-flat Major, Op.100 (D.929)
Franz Peter Schubert (1797-1828)

For Franz Schubert, 1827 was a bittersweet year. He was beginning to get somewhat wider recognition for his music beyond the popular songs and smaller piano pieces. He knew he was composing some of the best music of his modest years. But the syphilis that was to claim his life the following year was worsening, and the knowledge that he was dying lay heavily on his young shoulders. Some days he felt so terrible that he broke appointments. Generally, he started avoiding appearances at the musical gatherings that he had so loved, and his depression increased.

From such a year we might expect music as dark and despairing as *Winterreise*, and indeed Schubert composed part II of that immortal song cycle in 1827. What one does *not* expect is music of such resolute good cheer as the E-flat major piano trio, Op.100. As George Marek so aptly points out, "illness beset the man, not his work."

A strong four-bar unison phrase opens the trio. Reminiscent of the posthorn both in its E-flat tonality and its forthright melodic outline, it hardly prepares us for the adventuresome harmonic wanderings that follow. Uncharacteristically pianistic for Schubert, the movement derives a grace from its triple meter that frequently binds it to the spirit of minuet.

Legend has it that Schubert heard a Swedish tenor, Isak Albert Berg, sing at a Viennese musicale in November 1827, the month he began work on the E-flat Trio. Berg's recital included a Swedish folk song called "*Se solen sjunker*" ["The Sun has Set"]. Apparently quite taken with the tune, Schubert incorporated it as the basis for his slow movement, casting it as a funeral march with the cello as tenor soloist. (The melody also recurs in the finale.) With its vocal sound, at once resonant and mournful, the cello holds the spotlight in this *Andante con moto*. Eventually the song moves to the piano, but not to the violin until the very last measures of the coda, and then in unison with the cello.

We do not generally think of Schubert as a contrapuntal composer. The third movement, *Scherzando: Allegro moderato* is an unusual instance of Schubert writing a strict canon. In its Austrian simplicity and sheer melodic grace, this movement recalls some of the Haydn quartets. Also akin to Haydn is the plunky peasant dance of its trio section.

One of Schubert's longest movements, the finale demands stamina from its three performers. It also contains some of Schubert's finest piano writing. Replete with unexpected meter changes, colorful modulations, and two quasi-cyclic references to the Swedish tune, it is a marvel of musical richness.

Though it is a companion piece to the beloved B-flat trio, Op.99, Op.100 has never

achieved the same measure of popularity, and it is performed far less frequently. Yet Schubert preferred this work to the B-flat trio, and went to great trouble to secure its publication outside Austria. H.A. Probst in Leipzig did eventually publish Op.100, but unfortunately not soon enough for Schubert to see it before his untimely death in November 1828. One of the Trio's earliest champions was Robert Schumann, who perceived Op. 100 as

more active, masculine, and dramatic; [the B-flat] one is more passive, lyric, and feminine.

Though his pre-feminist, 1830s language may prompt an involuntary smile in 2023 (not to mention some disagreement from listeners!), Schumann must be credited with having recognized the worth and power of both Trios long before the rest of the musical world fell in love with these delightful works.

The first performance of the E-flat trio took place on 26 March, 1828 in Vienna. The occasion was an all-Schubert concert at the Society of the Friends of Music [*Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde*], which rented rooms in the Tuchlauben for musical performances. It was the first and only time in his career that he was courageous enough to risk a public performance of his compositions. (The famous *Schubertiads* took place in private homes.) Initially the event was scheduled for 21 March; however, Schubert postponed it to coincide with the first anniversary of Beethoven's death. The program included Schubert's song *Auf dem Strom*, which was written for the occasion; a movement of the G major string quartet, D.887, and this trio. The event was a popular, financial and musical success, providing Schubert with a rare week of happiness during his tragic final year.

Trio in A minor, Op. 50

Peter Ilych Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Tchaikovsky's monumental piano trio stands alone among his other chamber compositions, an independent only child with a big ego. Composed in December 1881 and January 1882, it is dedicated "*à la mémoire d'un grand artiste.*" The artist in question was Nikolai Rubinstein, brother of the more famous pianist Anton Rubinstein. Only six years older than Tchaikovsky, Nikolai had been granted an imperial charter for the Moscow Conservatory in the mid-1860s. In 1866 he hired Tchaikovsky to teach harmony there. Tchaikovsky had only just graduated from St. Petersburg Conservatory, and was a virtual unknown except for a recommendation from Nikolai's older brother. That gesture of confidence anchored a strong friendship between Nikolai Rubinstein and Tchaikovsky that was nearly wrecked by one incident: Nikolai's initial reaction to Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto was scathing. So hurt and incensed was Tchaikovsky that he altered his dedication from Rubinstein to the German pianist and conductor Hans von Bülow. Later, Rubinstein reassessed his first judgment and became a great champion and interpreter of the work.

Rubinstein died in Paris in March 1881, only 45 years old. Tchaikovsky was in Nice when he received the telegram with the news. Deeply affected by his friend's premature death, he set out for Moscow by way of Paris to pay his respects. According to his biographer David Brown:

No death had struck Tchaikovsky so hard since the passing of his own mother nearly 27 years before. Rubinstein had given him his first professional appointment, had directed him, bullied him, but in his own rough, imperious way had nursed Tchaikovsky's gifts, sometimes criticizing his works unceremoniously, but always with unflagging energy presenting them to the world so that their worth might be assessed and their fame grow. No man had done more for the cause of Tchaikovsky's music than this difficult but true friend.

We know that Mme von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patroness and soul-mate via correspondence, had suggested he write a piano trio (she maintained a resident piano trio in her personal establishment) some time earlier, but he had demurred, feeling no affinity for the medium. Rubinstein's death evidently helped him to bypass that particular compositional roadblock. Once he began work on the Trio, it came to him rapidly, and he completed work on it in a matter of weeks. In effect, the Trio is his requiem for Rubinstein.

In Russia, the A minor trio was the most popular of Tchaikovsky's chamber works for years, particularly in the first half of the 20th century. A major work of over 40 minutes' duration despite its limitation to two movements, it has had trouble winning friends elsewhere. For example, consider Edward Garden's dismissal in his otherwise largely sympathetic biography:

Tchaikovsky's [first movement] elegy is only superficially convincing, and the same is true of the very long series of variations that comprise the second movement. A naïve theme associated with his friend is mercilessly put through its paces, each variation being said to be connected with some incident in Rubinstein's life. The emotional involvement of even the enormous final variation is more apparent than real . . . despite some pages of well-wrought music.

Most listeners would be more charitable. Tchaikovsky's music is passionate, well-crafted, melodious. Still, the piece has been dogged with controversy, perhaps because of its immodest proportions and splashy history.

Tchaikovsky clearly intended to honor Nikolai's blazing pianistic talent, for the piano shines brilliantly throughout the work, especially during the first movement, *Pezzo elegiaco*. Among the segments of the second movement, Variations III (*Allegro moderato*), VI (*Tempo di valse*), and X (*Tempo di mazurka*) are particularly virtuosic, further suggesting the pianistic prowess of Tchaikovsky's recently departed friend. The variations are said to be biographical; whether we choose to assign personal remembrances or incidents to them is less important than their highly personal character.

Those who know Tchaikovsky's orchestral compositions will enjoy thoughtful comparison to his Variations on a Roco Theme for cello and orchestra. While the Trio is more elegiac and less overtly virtuosic, it shares with the Roco Variations a certain baroque flavor that marries nicely with its more impassioned late 19th-century musical language. After considerable virtuoso flourishes in the course of the variations, Op. 50 ends quietly. In the coda, Tchaikovsky brings back the funereal theme from the first movement, reinforcing the spirit of a

requiem for Rubinstein.