

Tchaikovsky: Piano Trio in A minor

Jeremy Nicholas talks to Trio Con Brio Copenhagen about one of the finest of all piano trios

Personally I think it is one of the greatest pieces for this combination because of both the scope and the content.' So says Jens Elvekjaer, pianist of the Trio Con Brio Copenhagen. Many would agree while admitting the irony of the composer resolutely refusing to write for the genre. 'Forgive me, dear friend,' he wrote to his patroness Nadezhda von Meck in November 1880. 'I would do anything to give you pleasure, but this is beyond me...I simply cannot endure the combination of piano with violin or cello. To my mind the timbre of these instruments will not blend.' It's a refusal that's all the more puzzling because the second movement of the Piano Concerto No 2, completed only a few months earlier, is essentially a piano trio.

The Second Piano Concerto was, significantly, dedicated to Nikolai Rubinstein. Before he could premiere the work – and just four months after Tchaikovsky's letter to Mme von Meck – Rubinstein died. Despite periods of estrangement, the loss to Tchaikovsky of his teacher, mentor and longtime friend left him bereft. It is against this background that the Piano Trio in A minor, Op 50 was conceived and composed. Completed in January 1882, Tchaikovsky dedicated the work 'In Memory of a Great Artist'.

The Copenhagen Trio started playing the work in 2004. Since then they reckon to have performed it nearly 100 times. 'It's a milestone of the repertoire, one of a kind,' says Soo-Kyung Hong, the South Korean cellist, wife of Jens Elvekjaer and sister of the Trio's violinist Soo-Jin Hong. 'Yes,' agrees Elvekjaer. 'And it's also interesting to see the influence the Tchaikovsky Trio has had on succeeding generations of Russian composers like Rachmaninov and Shostakovich. I think it was the first piano trio to have this form.'

The form is indeed unique: two movements, the first (*Pezzo elegiaco: Moderato assai*) in sonata form, the second (*Tema con variazioni: Andante con moto*) a set of variations (2A) on a folk-like theme (Rubinstein loved genuine folksongs) with the last variation set apart from the rest (*Variatione Finale e Coda: Allegro risoluto e con fuoco*) and



'It's like running a marathon': Trio Con Brio Copenhagen at the Tchaikovsky sessions

cast as a sonata movement of its own (2B). Explains Elvekjaer: 'You have the first part of the second movement [2A] in the dominant key and the last part [2B] in the tonic of A minor. So you have, in a simple way, that tension between the tonic and dominant ... it just takes 50 minutes! If you are able to convey this tension then you don't have the feeling as a player or listener that it is so long. You feel a connection from the first note to the last as though it's in one movement. That's something that develops over time when you perform it. You have this journey and, by the end, you feel that somehow you have arrived.'

I ask Elvekjaer what the biggest challenges are in playing what is arguably Tchaikovsky's most demanding score in terms of technique and stamina. 'Ninety pages is a lot!' the Danish pianist agrees. 'In the first movement, the piano is playing continuously and a lot of the time the writing is quite tricky but – and this is something that comes with a lot of performances – you eventually feel more on top of it and you learn how to "plan your powers"! But it's not just demanding in the virtuosic sense because in the variations movement it's a fascinating challenge to realise the colouration that Tchaikovsky asks for.'

The historical view



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Letter to Nadezhda von Meck
(January 25, 1882)

'I can say with some conviction that my work is not all bad...but I fear I may have arranged music of a symphonic character as a trio, instead of writing directly for the instruments.'

George Bernard Shaw
The Farnham, Haslemere and Hindhead
Herald (December 17, 1898)

'Tchaikovsky's Piano Trio in A minor exhibits all the qualities which have made its composer so popular now that he is dead, and we have had plenty of time to think about it.'

Eduard Hanslick
Am Ende des Jahrhunderts, Berlin (1899)
after the Vienna premiere of the Trio

'When the trio was played for the first time, the faces of the listeners expressed the wish it should be the last. It belongs to the category of suicidal compositions, which kill themselves by their merciless length.'