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HERMITAGE PIANO TRIO

ILYA KAZANTSEV, piano

SERGEY ANTONOV, cello

MISHA KEYLIN, violin

2:30 PM, Sunday, November 6, 2016

Faye Spanos Concert Hall

University of the Pacific

JOSEF SUK **ELÉGIE FOR PIANO TRIO, OP. 23** (1902)
(1874–1935)

FELIX MENDELSSOHN **PIANO TRIO IN C MINOR, OP. 66** (1845)
(1809–1847) *Allegro energico e con fuoco*
Andante espressivo
Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto
Finale: Allegro appassionato

— INTERMISSION —

MIKHAIL GLINKA **TRIO PATHÉTIQUE** (1827)
(1804–1857) *Allegro moderato—*
Scherzo: Vivacissimo—
Largo
Allegro con spirito

DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH **TRIO NO. 2 IN E MINOR, OP. 67** (1944)
(1906–1975) *Andante—Moderato—Poco più mosso*
Allegro con brio
Largo
Allegretto—Adagio

THE HERMITAGE PIANO TRIO appears by arrangement with Melvin Kaplan Inc.

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www.melkap.com

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ARTIST PROFILE



Descending from a great Russian musical tradition, the Hermitage Piano Trio is distinguished by its exuberant musicality, interpretative range, and sumptuous sound. In the same way that St. Petersburg's venerable Hermitage State Museum both represents the very essence and history of Russia while also using its collection to embrace and promote cultures from around the world, the Hermitage Piano Trio embodies the majesty of its Russian lineage while at the same time including in its immense repertoire works from the great European tradition to contemporary American commissions. Following a recent performance, *The Washington Post* raved that "three of Russia's most spectacular young soloists... turned in a performance of such power and sweeping passion that it left you nearly out of breath."

The Trio has performed to similarly tremendous acclaim for audiences in Los Angeles, New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. In 2015-16, the Hermitage will perform in Washington, D.C., New York, Virginia, Florida, Alabama, Mexico and Canada.

Based in the United States, the Trio excels at performing an enormous variety of music and has a wide repertoire ranging from Shostakovich, Arensky, Glinka, and Tchaikovsky to Haydn, Beethoven, Dvorak, and Brahms. Members of the Hermitage Piano Trio have taught at prestigious schools around the country and have recorded for Naxos and ALM Records. In addition, cellist Sergey Antonov is the artistic director of the concert series for the Chamber Music Foundation of New England.

Suk: *Elégie*

How many composers do you know who wrote their own funeral march? Josef Suk did in 1889 and it appears in his funeral symphony *Asrael*. *Ripening*, also a Suk symphony, was a story of pain and suffering that questioned the value of life. Morbidity was often a factor in Suk's music, and certainly plays a role in the *Elégie*.

Suk was well trained and deeply involved in music from an early age, although his musical skill was often said to be largely inherited. He learned violin, organ, and piano from his father and was further trained in violin and chamber works composition. Suk was not a particularly prolific composer, but that which he left is of very good quality. His earlier works are influenced by Dvořák and Czech folk music, but from 1904 when Dvořák died, his music grew darker and more somber.

The *Elégie* was written for a memorial event celebrating the life of Bohemian dramatist and poet Julius Zeyer, a writer of novels and epic poems steeped in the history and legends of Bohemia. His influence on Suk was second only to Dvořák's, and was made stronger by its association with the happiest years of his life around the time of his marriage to Otilie the daughter of Antonín Dvořák, the teacher from whom his greatest inspiration came.

The *Elégie* is subtitled '*Under the impression of Zeyer's Vyšehrad*', an epic poem written in 1880 and set in Czech antiquity. Vyšehrad is the ancient castle fortress overlooking the Vitava River in Prague, which figures prominently in Czech national legends.¹ The *Elegy* was originally written for the unusual combination of violin, cello, and string quartet with harp and harmonium, but was then re-scored for the more manageable piano trio.

It is a funeral lament that begins with presentation of a yearning song heard first from the violin which is then joined by the cello. This phrase is repeated and developed by these two instruments while the piano accompaniment is subdued. This adagio is followed by a brief second section in which the piano creates a somber mood. The final section echoes the meditative atmosphere of the first movement and concludes with a coda that echoes the second section. Finally, Suk uses an oblique reference to acknowledge a phrase from his great mentor Dvořák's recent opera *Rusalka* before the returning melody brings us to a peaceful conclusion.

Mendelssohn: *Trio in C Minor*

The classic issues facing the composer of the "piano trio" form are two: how to balance the overpowering sound of the piano against that of the two strings, and how to give each of the three instruments interesting parts. The first is solved by both composer and performers. The answer for the second grew out of the beginning in the second half of the 18th century.

The piano trio evolved from the Baroque trio sonata in which the piano's string companions were often considered as optional. Joseph Haydn's earliest works were, in fact, called "Sonatas for pianoforte with accompaniment of violin and violoncello." In the last of his 45 such works, we still find the cello reduced to little more than doubling the keyboard's bass and the violin allocated only a trifling of thematic matter. Mozart initiated the correction of this inequity, but it was Beethoven who, in the "Archduke" Trio, effected the proper balance by making the form a quasi-concerto, a challenging showpiece for all three instruments.

This description equally applies to Felix Mendelssohn's two piano trios. Both are compositions in which exceptional musicality is linked with instrumental brilliance, with the first edging out the second somewhat in virtuosity but the second winning in elegance and flair.

Raised in prosperity and ease, Felix Mendelssohn's gifted musical talent was acknowledged and cultivated by his whole family. The Mendelssohn home was a hub for the artistic and intellectual elite of Germany, and the many family visitors encouraged and supported him. It was in this milieu of musical stimulation and within the warmth of the family circle that young Felix prepared himself for all that was to follow, bursting upon the world at large at 17 with two masterpieces already under his belt, the *Octet*, Op. 20 and the *Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The Trio opens in a quiet, somber mood with a stern but agitated, non-melodic, driving theme in the piano repeated almost exactly by the strings. In an extremely extensive development, Mendelssohn plays up the contrasts among three musical ideas in all manner of imitative and contrapuntal ways, often fragmented in a give-and-take between keyboard and strings, by using variations in tempo, and constantly recombining the melodies. The final synthesis occurs in a surprising coda.

The second movement is lighter in tone with a tender lyric quality that has the meandering, almost sentimental character of one of his *Lieder ohne Worte*. It contains no exact repeats, but listen for the simple four-note syncopated motive that holds it together. Listen also for the middle section switch to the minor mode and temporary modification of the little rhythmic figure.

It remains for the mercurial *Scherzo* that follows to give the Trio a major kick in spirit. Here Mendelssohn is in his element as the purveyor of his glorious youthful tour de force *Midsummer Night's Dream* whimsy and rakishness. The *Scherzo* flies by in a blizzard of notes and is characterized by a vaguely Hungarian gypsy flavor.

Beginning as an elegant waltz, the finale, marked *Allegro appassionato*, gradually increases in expressive passion. For reasons no one has quite figured out, Mendelssohn introduces a personalized version of a Lutheran chorale tune as a thematic surprise. (Do you recognize it?) Combining it with the waltz theme adds a strong measure of dignity that is exceptionally virtuosic and sonorously extroverted and drastically changes the character of the movement into a prayer.

The Trio concludes with an extensive, exuberant coda that is nearly symphonic in scope. The race to the finish line is filled with fiery and soaring playing and a fortissimo final cadence worthy of a concerto.

Less popular than his first, this second Piano Trio exemplifies all the finest qualities of Mendelssohn's flawless art. It was composed two years before his death and was his last chamber work published.

Glinka: *Trio Pathétique*

As a child, Mikhail Ivanovich Glinka was often sick. Because his older brother died in infancy, his grandmother overprotected him, keeping him in a warm room at all times to fend off another family calamity. Sadly, this upbringing turned him into a dreadful hypochondriac. Throughout Glinka's life he was always suffering from some or many maladies.

Glinka is often called the "Father of Russian Music," the "Father of Russian Opera" and the "First National Russian Composer." For example, as his mentor he

¹ You may know it as the title to the first movement of Smetana's orchestral cycle *Má vlast*

encouraged the Russian pianist Mily Balakirev to pursue a career in composing and conducting. Glinka is often also credited with inspiring Balakirev to form a school of Russian music. The result was the Mighty Five (Balakirev, Borodin, Cui, Mussorgsky, and Rimsky-Korsakov) who believed Russia should have its own music.

Considering that Glinka is often called the father of almost all things dealing with Russian music, it is surprising to discover that he did not actually start out life with aspirations to a career in music; he studied at the Higher Pedagogical Institute in Moscow and from 1824 worked as a secretary in the transport ministry until that pesky, ubiquitous ill health thing inspired him to travel to Italy. In Italy he was elated to discover the music of Bellini and Donizetti. This inspired him to compose on themes from their music, until home-sickness possessed him and, as he wrote, “gradually inspired in me the wish to compose in a Russian way.”

It is also surprising to learn that at the time Glinka wrote *Trio Pathétique*, he had not begun to take composition lessons and relied entirely on his expert piano playing and his innate skills for composition.

Why did Glinka title this work “pathétique?” It is difficult to know whether it might refer to his daily endurance of camphorated chest plasters or, more plausible perhaps, that it refers to an unrequited romantic attachment. The autograph score reads: “*Trio Pathétique pour Pianoforte, Clarinette/ Violine and Bassoon/ Viola/ Violoncello par M. J. Glinka, Je n’ai connu l’amour que par les peines qu’il cause!*”²

The original instrumentation of the trio was clarinet, bassoon, and piano, but the work is also beautiful when played by a traditional piano trio, the usual form it takes in modern performance.

The trio is laid out in orthodox four-movement form of post-Beethoven/Schubert piano trio, and yet it retains the character of a single-movement piece. In fact, the first three movements are intended to be played straight through without a break, and the finale is little more than a brief conclusion that conveys a revisit of material previously heard.

In the first movement, an *Allegro moderato*, the violin and cello serenade one another with the principal thematic idea while the piano mimics and undulates beneath. This uneasy, restive quality counterbalances a fertile second idea, and another memorably beautiful melody

in the cello in the central trio section of the second movement, a *Scherzo*. It is typically playful yet balanced. The emotional center of the work is the *Largo*, the longest of the movements, in which the violin sings, the cello answers, then the two play lyrically together. The finale, *Allegro con spirito* and the shortest movement, begins with the first movement’s theme, then continues with all the various thematic elements reviewed and the work reaches, in wild passion, an intense, even victorious conclusion.

Shostakovich: *Trio in E Minor*

Shostakovich, along with his older contemporaries Prokofiev and Stravinsky, represents the culmination of 20th century Russian music. Tomes have been written about Shostakovich’s ambivalent relationship with the Soviet regime, much of which is based on ex-post-facto commentary the authenticity of which is often impossible to verify. As a teen, he was a true believer in the Russian Revolution, but in his early 20s he was mired in the Stalinist nightmare and probably survived the purges only because Stalin liked his propaganda film music.

Living in a highly regimented society and in constant fear for his life, Shostakovich used his chamber music compositions to express his most intimate and personal feelings. It was composed in 1943-44 in the midst of the war. This Trio is Shostakovich’s private lamentation, mirroring his emotional response to the loss of both his close friend, Ivan Sollertinsky, and the despairs of his native country: the systematic destruction of Russian culture through Stalin’s mass purges and the subsequent mass annihilation of Russia’s Jews by Hitler.

The Trio opens with an *Andante* canon in a lugubrious, modal theme meant to sound like a Jewish tune.³ It is played first by the unaccompanied cello in whistling harmonics that make it the top fugal voice. Then the violin enters becoming the lower string voice followed by the piano in the lowest register. The result is strenuous and unnerving and sets a macabre quality for the whole piece. This then transforms into a marginally faster *Moderato* where the melody advances into a second with ongoing canon. Other melodies are added to the amalgam, and the music builds to a commanding culmination before finally closing in pensive stillness.

The energetic *Scherzo* that follows is noted *Allegro con brio* and begins innocuously with a

little fugue but sardonically degenerates and is driven into a vicious, frantic, and fiendish dance of death. It persistently wavers on the brink. Listen for rolling scales and harsh, recurring rhythmic motifs (think jovial folk dance) intensifying toward obsessive mania.

In surprising divergence from the *Scherzo*, the emotional heart of the Trio pulses in the *Largo*. The slow, third movement is in the form of a Chaconne, a theme and variation form from the 17th century. It opens with eight huge, lumbering, dissonant chords from the piano. Do you hear the imitation of a tolling funeral bell? This chorale theme becomes the ostinato bass of the passacaglia, repeated a total of six times while the violin and cello are again in canon with a somber, elegiac melody full of tormented dissonances between the two parts.

The *Largo* fades away and immediately is linked by ominous staccato notes in the piano into the final *Allegretto*, again based on a Jewish theme. It begins with the strings playing pizzicato in apparent joviality but slowly and inescapably descends into an emotional hell, mimicking the Jews who were forced to dance on the edge of the graves they had just dug before being machine gunned. Just before the end, the opening theme from the first movement joins in. Signaled by the passacaglia theme, the music slows down and fades gradually into the silence of death. The impact of this in performances during the war was huge, and it is not surprising that listeners at the time would sit in stunned silence before erupting in applause.

It was predictable that in 1944, with victory over Germany near, Stalin’s censors were reluctant to allow such a pessimistic work. Its performance was finally permitted only after the censors were convinced that the work depicted the cruelty of German occupation. As an artistic work, Shostakovich’s music portrays the agony of the war years in an epic manner. The Second Piano Trio fulfills its envisioned role as a memorial to a close friend while serving as a powerful commentary on the massive and reprehensible loss of life brought about by the darkest side of human nature.

— notes © Dr. Michael Spencer

² “All I know of love is the pain it causes!”

³ This is his first use of Jewish themes in composition

61ST SEASON 2016-2017

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