

## Aquinas Trio

### Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Trio élégiaque No.1 in G minor (1892)

Rachmaninov was born into an aristocratic family, but his father's reckless improvidence had reduced them to just a single estate near Novgorod where Sergei started to learn the piano. When he was nine, this estate too had to be sold, and the family moved to St Petersburg where he studied piano and harmony at the conservatory. Shortly after the move, his sister Sofiya died of diphtheria, and his parents separated. This upheaval led to Rachmaninov failing his exams and aged 12 being sent to live with and to study under the authoritarian Nikolai Zverev of the Moscow Conservatory. The move was his making. Not only did he acquire strict work habits but at Zverev's Sunday afternoon gatherings he came into contact with composers such as Anton Rubinstein, Taneyev, Arensky and in particular Tchaikovsky.

Rachmaninov's desire to compose led in 1889, aged 16, to a break with Zverev who was only concerned to develop his considerable pianistic skills. Again, the break proved fruitful. His teaching was taken over by a talented cousin, Alexander Siloti, who had been taught by Liszt, and Rachmaninov moved in with the Satins, relatives of a fellow conservatory student. During the summer he stayed at Ivanovka, the Satin's country estate 500 km south-east of Moscow. He was to compose almost all his works there, inspired throughout his life by the rural tranquillity reminiscent of childhood days in Novgorod. His teacher Siloti resigned from the conservatory in 1891, and Rachmaninov, rather than taking a new teacher, decided to graduate a year early, which he did the following year, becoming only the third recipient of the Great Gold Medal in composition.

The first *Trio élégiaque* dates from the beginning of his graduation year and is a single movement lasting a little over 10 minutes. It starts *Lento lugubre* over tremulous strings and finishes with a funeral march, but in between becomes more animated and *appassionata*. Much of the movement is based on a simple, memorable, gloomily Russian theme with which the piece opens.

The trio may have been inspired by Tchaikovsky's own piano trio

mourning Nikolai Rubinstein; Rachmaninov wrote a second *Trio élégiaque* the following year in turn mourning the tragic death of Tchaikovsky himself.



### Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847) Piano Trio No. 2 in C minor Op. 66 (1845)

*Allegro energico e fuoco*

*Andante espressivo*

*Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto*

*Finale: Allegro appassionato*

Mendelssohn's second piano trio was written just two years before his death in a rare quiet period between times when he was recklessly busy. Since 1835 he had been conductor and then also musical director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus; then, in 1841 he accepted King Frederick William IV of Prussia's invitation to be his *Kapellmeister*, a post which included composing royal commissions as well as the usual producing and conducting obligations. He continued to juggle these two appointments, as well as travelling to London to conduct his work and to entertain Queen Victoria and Prince Albert with, for example, improvisations on '*Rule, Britannia!*'. In 1843 he opened the Leipzig Conservatoire where he taught composition, singing and instrumental performance, along with Ferdinand David (violin) and Robert Schumann (piano and score reading). In September 1844, shortly after

finishing the long-gestated Violin Concerto, he asked the king to be released from his service, a request that the king partly acceded to, retaining Mendelssohn to compose special commissions. In the summer of 1845, after turning down an invitation to conduct in New York, and also having taken sabbatical leave from his Leipzig conducting, he had time to enjoy family life in Frankfurt where he composed a variety of choral and instrumental music including today's piano trio. The trio is dedicated to the violinist and composer Louis Spohr who later visited Mendelssohn in Leipzig. The only chamber work that Mendelssohn wrote after this trio was the anguished string quartet lamenting the death of his sister Fanny. Mendelssohn himself died just six months later.

The restless first movement opens *pianissimo* with a surging arch-shaped figure in the piano, soon followed by a slower but similarly shaped theme in the violin and cello against rippling semiquavers in the piano; this theme mutates into the second theme proper introduced fortissimo in the major by violin and cello against forceful semiquavers in the piano. The movement follows traditional sonata form; as this material is developed, the piano barely pauses in its headlong accompanying quavers and semiquavers. The *Andante* pulses gently in Eb major with the charm of one of Mendelssohn's "Songs without Words". The *Scherzo*, as so often with Mendelssohn, effectively evokes again the fairy world that he precociously revealed, aged 17, in his "A Midsummer Night's Dream" overture. The fairies are banished at the start of the *Finale*, as the cello leaps an unusual 9<sup>th</sup> and then chuckles down the scale. This figure also forms the unlikely asides from the strings to the piano's introduction of a contrasting chorale theme ("Before Your Throne" from the Geneva Psalter of 1551). The chorale becomes grander, and the asides less chuckley as the movement ends in style.



### Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) Piano Trio No. 3 in F minor Op. 65 (1883)

*Allegro, ma non troppo*

*Allegretto grazioso – meno mosso*

*Poco Adagio*

*Finale. Allegro con brio*

This piano trio dates from a similar time in Dvořák's life to the Op 61 quartet played by the Castalian at the beginning of the season. Prior to this time, Dvořák's music was Slavonic, folk-oriented, generally genial and carefree. But, as a result of an anti-Czech political mood in Austria, his Viennese audience had become "prejudiced against a composition with a Slav flavour" (Dvořák to the conductor Richter, 1884). His new style, apparent both here and in the Seventh Symphony Op 70, was altogether darker and more dramatic. Another likely influence on this piano trio was the recent death of his mother. Whatever its background, the work was complex and masterful, full of intense contrasts - his finest chamber work yet.

The first movement starts innocuously enough with the violin and cello very quietly in octaves. But two bars later they



descend fortissimo from the heights in triplets into angry despair with spread chords. The cello then introduces a quiet, tender theme, and the movement continues on an elegiac, emotional roller coaster with a wealth of contrasting melodic material. The writing is

complex, reminiscent of Schumann and of Dvořák's champion, Brahms.

The scherzo-like *Allegretto* shifts the key down a third from the previous F minor into C# minor – actually Db minor in disguise, but Dvořák kindly gives the player only 4 sharps instead of 8 flats! Why does Dvořák write in these complicated keys? You'd never catch Mozart doing that. (Ironically, in the 1930's a distant American relation, August Dvorak, designed a simpler keyboard for the typewriter!) The movement starts off with the strings alternating notes that can sound like paired quavers in a fast conventional scherzo in 3/4, but are actually triplets in a slower 2/4, a time signature that is confirmed when the piano enters in the third bar. Playing 3 against 2 in interesting ways was a favourite device of Dvořák's champion, Brahms, and indeed this work has been described as Dvořák's most Brahmsian. The slower trio is in Db major (only 5 flats!).

The *Poco Adagio* is a masterpiece, if anything could have won the Viennese audience over to a Czech composer, this would have done it. The cello introduces a melancholy, minor key theme and then joins the



violin's embellished reiteration. Now comes a stroke of genius: the violin, unaccompanied, plays the tenderest of figures in the major that becomes a little canon with the cello. In turn, the cello leads, again embellishing, and the violin follows. Soon demisemiquaver rumblings in the piano presage a stormy passage (in 5 sharps, aka 7 flats), before the violin soars away *pianissimo* to a top B (aka Cb) and calm returns. All these glories are revisited before the movement ends happily.

The *Finale* is based on the Czech Furiant dance – in 3/4 time with marked cross-rhythms, the loud, energetic opening contrasting with a lilting waltz-like episode introduced by the violin and cello. Towards the end, themes from the previous movement are recalled and the music pauses before the final 8-bar dash.



Programme notes by Chris Darwin