

14th November 2021 – Joanna MacGregor Piano With Brighton Philharmonic Chamber Ensemble – Programme notes by Chris Darwin

Frank Martin (1890 – 1974) Trio on Popular Irish Folk Tunes (1925)

Allegro moderato

Adagio

Gigue

Frank Martin was born in Geneva, the tenth child of a Calvinist, Huguenot pastor; this Christian background particularly influenced his large-scale theatrical and choral works. Much of his chamber music was written in the 1920s and 30s during which time he was heavily involved in the Geneva Chamber Music Society that he had founded. Today's Trio comes from early in this period. His most individual music, however, started to emerge in the mid-1930s when he developed his own more tonal and rhythmically energetic variety of Schoenberg's 12-tone system.

The toe-tapping rhythmic liveliness of the outer two movements of this Trio may not be entirely due to its Irish sources. In the 1920s Martin worked closely with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze. "Dalcroze Eurhythmics" emphasised the importance of bodily movement in music education, and was taken up later by "Music & Movement" in the UK and the Orff approach in the US.

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906 – 1975) Piano Trio No. 2 in E minor Opus 67 (1944)

Andante

Allegro con brio

Largo

Allegretto

This Trio is dedicated to the memory of Shostakovich's close friend, the erudite music critic Ivan Sollertinsky. His sudden, early death aged 41 left Shostakovich bereft of a trustworthy soulmate. The Trio follows in a line of Russian elegiac piano trios: Tchaikovsky's in memory of Nikolai Rubinstein, and Rachmaninov's in memory of Tchaikovsky. But Shostakovich in 1944 is also expressing the suffering of the victims of war and barbarity, in particular through the appearance of Eastern European Jewish folk music to which Sollertinsky had introduced him. In addition, the Trio pays tribute to Shostakovich's young pupil Veniamin Fleishman, who defended Leningrad in the People's Volunteer Guard and was one of its first victims. Fleishman left an unfinished opera, *Rothschild's Violin* (based on the Chekhov story); after his death, Shostakovich rescued the manuscript from Leningrad, orchestrated it and facilitated its performance. Jewish dance themes from the opera appear in the finale of Shostakovich's Trio.

The work opens with a ghostly fugue whose sombre mood and arch-like form are reminiscent of Beethoven's C#-minor string quartet. But Shostakovich creates a unique sound with the hauntingly ethereal high

harmonics of the muted cello (*illustrated* – the harmonic sounds two octaves above the lower note). The rising fourth (*bracketed here and in*

subsequent examples) is a recurring element in the work. The fugal *Andante* leads into a faster *Moderato*,

Andante

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef, key signature of one sharp (F#), and 4/4 time signature. It starts with a piano (p) dynamic marking. A bracket underlines a rising fourth interval (F#-C#) in the first measure. The bottom staff continues the melody with a slur over a series of notes, including a sharp sign above a note.

the tempo quickens again and the mood continues to lighten into a positively exuberant figure leaping an optimistic ninth (*illustrated*).

The *scherzo* second movement is not only in the spikily remote 6-sharps of F#-major (just a semitone down from the final G major of the first movement) but also very fast, very strongly accented and heavy (*illustrated*), about as different as it could be from the opening of the first movement. It whirls on at finger-knotting pace; a figure consisting of rapid consecutive up-bows adds to the relentless, manic exhilaration.



Exhausted despair returns with the Chaconne-like *Largo*. The opening eight dourly inscrutable piano chords underlie variations on a mournfully sad and tender theme (*illustrated*).



The 'Dance of Death' final movement follows without a break. It was written after Shostakovich had read about the Red Army's liberation of the Polish death camps such as Treblinka. Staccato notes in the piano introduce the two sets of repeated bars that start the skeletal pizzicato theme (*illustrated*) with its Eastern Jewish folk rhythms. The exuberant upward leap of a ninth from the first movement is now a desperate final accented fall. The deadly dance becomes ever more frenzied, before a final ghostly reprise of the opening. Shostakovich used the opening theme again, notably in his 8th String Quartet and the 'Babi Yar' 13th Symphony.



Antonín Dvořák (1841 – 1904) Piano Quintet in A Major Op 81 (1887)

1. *Allegro, ma non tanto*
2. *Dumka: Andante con moto; Vivace*
3. *Scherzo (Furiant): Molto vivace*
4. *Finale: Allegro*

This work is actually Dvořák's second Piano Quintet in A major. He became dissatisfied with the first (an early work Op 5 composed in 1872) shortly after its premier and destroyed the score. Fifteen years later, he had second thoughts and extensively revised a friend's copy. After third thoughts, he decided to write a completely new piece: today's Op 81 and one of his most popular. In it he reverts to composing in his earlier Bohemian folk idiom, although Brahms had urged him to adopt a more Germanic style.

The radiant, lyrical opening theme on the cello (*illustrated*) is answered by an



energetic figure from the violin, which then becomes more assertively double-dotted (*illustrated*). A wealth of similarly contrasting material pours into the mix as Dvořák stirs the pot with skilful glee.



A *Dumka* comes next. The word is from a Slavic root meaning to ponder or meditate and although the sung form dates back to the 16th century the instrumental form only burgeoned in the late 19th and was particularly favoured by Dvořák. Its basis is a plaintive, strophic lament, whose slow sections can be interspersed with contrasting, faster episodes.

After a brief introduction, the viola (Dvořák's own instrument) gets the gloomy tune (*illustrated*). The overall pattern of the movement is A-B-A-C-A-B-A with A the opening gloom and its derivatives, and B & C faster sections.



The *Scherzo*, subtitled *Furiant*, cracks along testing the nimbleness of the players but with the cello blessed with another theme reminiscent of the work's opening. The *Trio* gives us a tranquil respite before the returning *Furiant* dashes to the finish.

The *Finale* continues the energy of the *Scherzo* with another finger-twisting tune, which, unfortunately for the second violin

(*illustrated*), Dvořák turns into a rather ungratifying



fugue – perhaps feeling the need to acknowledge the Germanic tendency. Fugue over, the fun of Bohemian folk carries us to a rousing conclusion.

Programme notes by Chris Darwin