

Paddington Trio 20 Nov 2022 ACCA

Judith Weir (b. 1954) Your Light May Go Out (2004)

Judith Weir is one of Britain's most well known composers, indeed, she is Master of the King's Music - the first female to hold this post. In an illuminating interview on Youtube she explains that she has no preconceptions about her compositions: 'the wish as a composer is always to lose yourself, to do different things, not to go down the same tracks'.

'*Your Light May Go Out* is the second movement of Weir's *Piano Trio Two*. Each movement is based on a Zen koan. Weir has written her own description of the piece: 'the violin and cello, very closely intertwined, begin by presenting a dark musical line imprinted with the ghostly image of an English folk tune. The piano, playing chords, adds ever increasing illumination to the music, until the end, when darkness and brightness meet.'

This writer feels the piece quite differently: the violin and cello duet together, caressing the same rising figure of three, four or five notes. The piano then intrudes, harsh, abrasive, and the duetting strings retreat, at first holding on to their motif, then scattering in a panic of triplets. They resume their duet briefly till two sharp notes from the piano bring the piece to an end.

Judith Weir herself would, I think, not object to any listener's response to her music. She has said 'I welcome performances that are not what I expect' and that would include audience responses too.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Trio in D, Op.70 No.1 (Ghost) (1808)

Allegro vivace e con brio
Largo assai ed espressivo
Presto

1808 saw Beethoven composing at full power: his Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, the Choral Fantasia, the A-major cello sonata as well as the two Op 70 piano trios all come from this year. The cello sonata and the piano trios seem to have been part of a conscious decision by him to revisit the chamber music forms with which he had made such an impact shortly after his arrival in Vienna.

Why the '*Ghost*' trio? The name was coined by Carl Czerny, pianist, composer, pupil and friend of Beethoven who wrote that the slow movement always reminded him of the appearance of Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*. It is not known whether Czerny was aware that Beethoven had included in the sketchbook that he had used for the *Ghost* Trio preliminary ideas for an opera based on *Macbeth*. Whether or not Beethoven specifically had Banquo in mind, the trio is certainly dramatic.

The opening (*illustrated*) is ferociously violent with groups of four quavers (bracketed) battling with the triple-time key signature. Immediately, though, the cello presents an 'aching, tender melody' (*illustrated*); each of its first two bars presents a motif for later development as the movement batters us with conflicting emotions.

Allegro vivace con brio

The eponymous slow movement is marked *Largo assai* – Very slow – and slow it is, I know of none slower in chamber music. In many performances, each crotchet beat takes almost 4 seconds. A consequence of this sepulchral tempo is that in order to get the players to play fast you have to write lots of notes in the bar: just before the end there are shuddering bars that contain 48 separate triplet hemi-demi-semi-quavers! As Angus Watson points out, these trembling figures are reminiscent of Florestan's despairing aria at the opening of Act 2 of *Fidelio*, and this movement lacks none of its spine-chilling passion. Note that the opening two crotchets on the violin (*illustrated*) D and G are the same notes as the first two crotchet beats in the opening theme of the first movement (*).

Largo assai ed espressivo
(♩ = c.35) Piano

The last movement opens expansively and genially, then pauses twice for breath, gathering its strength to lay some of the preceding ghosts.

Arvo Pärt (b.1935) Mozart – Adagio (1992 revised 2005)

This short (6' or so) piano trio was written by the Estonian Arvo Pärt in memory of his friend the Russian violinist Oleg Kagan. Kagan was particularly renowned for his chamber music partnership with his wife, cellist Natalia Gutman, and pianist Sviatoslav Richter. Kagan had become seriously ill with cancer in 1989 and died a year later aged 43 in Munich. 216 years earlier in the same city, the 18-year-old Mozart had written his Piano Sonata in F K.280. Its *Adagio*, in the form of an F-minor *Siciliana* (*illustrated*), has an extraordinary tragic power emphasised by poignant use of the semitone interval of a minor second (as in the opening three notes). Pärt's reworking of the Mozart *Adagio* is respectful and moving. Much of it is an arrangement for the trio of selections from the original - the violin is given a particularly touching episode. But Pärt also adds a brief introduction and briefer coda of spare string chords to the main body of the work, which is overlaid with an occasional interjected commentary, exploiting the minor second to sharpen the intensity of a powerful piece.

Adagio *tr*

Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975) Piano Trio No 2 in E Minor Op 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, 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

underly 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.

Programme notes by Andrew Polmear (Weir) & Chris Darwin (Beethoven, Pärt, Shostakovich)