

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 29 November 2021 1.00pm

Amatis Piano Trio

Lea Hausmann violin
Samuel Shepherd cello
Andrei Gologan piano

BBC
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



Supported by CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust

Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975)

Piano Trio No. 1 in C minor Op. 8 (1923)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Trio No. 1 in B Op. 8 (1853-4 rev. 1889)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto •
III. Adagio • IV. Finale. Allegro*

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Fragile health was a fact of life for **Dmitry Shostakovich**. Early in 1923, while studying piano and composition at the Petrograd (St Petersburg) Conservatory, he contracted tuberculosis of the lymph glands. That summer he was sent to a sanatorium in the Crimea to convalesce. It turned out to be an agreeable few months. Heedless of his mother's dire warnings against amorous entanglements, Shostakovich fell in love with a philology professor's daughter, Tatyana Glivenko. Despite maternal disapproval and long periods of separation, their attachment lasted for several years. And it was to Tatyana that Shostakovich dedicated the single-movement Piano Trio he composed in the late summer of 1923, just before his 17th birthday.

Although the movement follows the outlines of sonata form, with two distinct themes, a development and a recapitulation, its extreme contrasts of tempo and texture create the impression of a free fantasy (Shostakovich's original title for the Trio was *Poème*). With a nod to Liszt's B minor Piano Sonata – a work Shostakovich much admired – the whole movement grows from the two motifs of the opening theme: a drooping chromatic figure, and an aspiring upward leap. The leaping figure twice morphs into a spiky, astringent dance, then colours the yearning second theme, sung by the cello against bell-like piano figuration. Lifted from an unfinished Piano Sonata, this melody is as close as Shostakovich ever gets to the luxuriant lyricism of Rachmaninov.

Both themes undergo further transformations in the development, which climaxes in a manic scherzo-like episode (*Prestissimo fantastico*). Here, more than anywhere else in the Trio, we glimpse the grotesque, acerbic Shostakovich familiar from so many later scherzos. The two themes are then freely recapitulated (the second theme now on the violin's rich G string) before a lively coda and a final *fff* apotheosis of the 'Rachmaninov' theme.

Although Shostakovich gave a private performance of the Trio with friends from the Petrograd Conservatory, it was neither publicly performed nor published in his lifetime. By the time it finally appeared in print, 60 years later, the final bars of the piano part had been lost. Shostakovich's pupil Boris Tishchenko duly made up the shortfall.

Forget the familiar sepia photographs of the grizzled, middle-aged **Brahms** with the Old Testament beard. When he completed the original version of his B major Piano Trio, he was the passionate, handsome 'young eagle' whose genius had so overwhelmed Robert and Clara Schumann in Düsseldorf in the autumn of 1853. Early the following year Brahms plunged into the composition of the B major Trio, completing it in June, the month after his 21st birthday. This was a time of extreme stress for the young composer. In February Schumann had confined himself to an asylum in Endenich, outside Bonn. Brahms immediately rushed to Düsseldorf to help the distraught Clara in whatever ways he could: taking over some of her teaching, overseeing the family's financial affairs and paying regular visits to Schumann in Endenich.

Around the time he finished the B major Trio, Brahms poured out his feelings for Clara to the violinist Joseph Joachim. In its original incarnation, the work can be heard as an impassioned musical autobiography: crammed full of memorable but – especially in the vast outer movements – disparate ideas, with allusions to songs by Schubert ('Am Meer', from *Schwanengesang*) and Beethoven that were surely coded 'messages' to Clara. Whether or not Clara picked up the reference to Schubert's song of lost or impossible love, she will not have missed the finale's allusion to the last song of Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* ('To the Distant Beloved'), which Robert Schumann had quoted in his Op. 17 Fantasie and Second Symphony.

Published soon after its completion in the summer of 1854, the original version of the B major Trio was widely performed. But Brahms was an inveterate reviser. On holiday in Bad Ischl in September 1889, the 56-year-old composer wrote to Clara: 'You would never guess what childish amusement I have used to while away the gorgeous summer days. I've rewritten my B major Trio. It will not be as wild, but whether it will be better?'

In middle age Brahms's instincts were to cut and tighten. He retained more or less intact the B minor *Scherzo*, a cussed, sometimes explosive take on the Mendelssohnian 'fairy scherzo' that encloses a lilting waltz-like Trio. Apart from the inspired opening themes of the other three movements, everything else was completely rewritten.

It's hard not to agree with Brahms that the first movement, especially, benefited from his radical makeover. For all its individual beauties, the original version threatened to fall apart at the seams. So out went the fussy transition passages, snatches of recitative and incongruous stretches of neo-Bachian fugal writing. In their stead Brahms wrote an impassioned second theme, as lyrical as the gloriously expansive opening but with an underlying dynamic energy.

As in 1854, the *Adagio* opens with a serene piano chorale answered by *espressivo* strings. But the movement, like the first, is now far more concentrated, with the Schubert quotation replaced by a plangent cello melody – one of Brahms's most haunting lyrical inventions.

Clara largely approved of Brahms's rewriting ('The entire Trio strikes me as much better proportioned...'), but had one serious reservation. While the driving finale ends implacably in B minor, as in the 1854 original, Brahms replaced its confessional *An die ferne Geliebte* melody with a muscular piano theme underpinned by heavy (*pesante*) syncopations. 'Quite ghastly' was Clara's blunt, if not quite impartial, verdict. In recasting the finale Brahms had written her out of the script.