

Bedřich Smetana – Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 15

- I. Moderato assai
- II. Allegro, ma non agitato
- III. Finale. Presto

The Piano Trio in G minor, op. 15 was composed early in Smetana's career, before the largely self-taught composer had established himself as 'the father' of Czech nationalist music. Smetana's political engagement began in 1846 (after civil war had erupted in many regions of the Hapsburg Empire, including his native Bohemia), and his fierce national pride would inspire his most famous works: the opera *The Bartered Bride* (1866), and the symphonic cycle *Má vlast* ('My Fatherland', 1874–79). Unlike these pieces, however, the Piano Trio drew inspiration from a more personal source, and was one of only four chamber works that Smetana composed throughout his life.

After opening his own music school in late 1848, Smetana's modest income finally allowed him to marry his beloved Kateřina Kolářová, and the couple became parents to four daughters in close succession. The eldest, Bedřiška—named after her father, and affectionately nicknamed 'Fritzi'—showed signs of musical talent, and with encouragement from her father was singing and playing the piano from an early age. However, tragedy struck from June 1854 when the Smetanas' second child, Gabriela, died from tuberculosis, and in September 1855, Fritzi succumbed to scarlet fever. Of his beloved daughter, Smetana wrote in his diary: "Nothing can replace Fritzi, the angel whom death has stolen from us."

Smetana absorbed himself in composition to cope with the loss. His Piano Trio in G minor, completed in late 1855 at the age of 31, is widely acknowledged as the first work to demonstrate his full compositional ability. Its dedication reads: "in memory of our eldest child Bedřiška, whose rare musical talent gave us such delight; too early snatched from us by death at the age of 4 and a half years."

In a letter written later in life, Smetana recalled: "The loss of my eldest daughter, that extraordinarily gifted child, inspired me to write the Trio in G minor in 1855. In the winter of the same year, in December, it was performed in public in Prague, with myself at the piano, Königslöw, violin, and Goltermann, cello. Success—nil." However, Smetana played the piece to Liszt a year later, and his Hungarian colleague was impressed enough to organise subsequent, more successful performances across Austria and Germany.

The pathos that permeates this trio is evident in its tonality alone, with each of the three movements written in G minor. The themes are also dominated by falling intervals, a kind of musical coding for weeping or sighs. The first movement takes the form of a sonata, whose principal theme—announced by the violin on the lowest (G) string—is developed emotively throughout the work. The second movement resembles a scherzo with two trio sections, labelled 'Alternativo I', primarily gentle and lyrical, and 'Alternativo II', which is more laboured, with contrasting dotted rhythms that foreshadow the funeral march of the finale.

The Finale begins with a rolling presto that makes heavy use of material from Smetana's earlier Piano Sonata in G minor (1846). The violin and cello thus serve frequently as accompaniment to the piano, as the movement alternates between dance and nostalgic reflection. After a brief funeral march, notated simultaneously in 2/4 and 6/8 time, an earlier theme reappears in the major mode to close the trio abruptly, leaving the painful loss unresolved.

Ludwig van Beethoven – Piano Trio in C minor, Op. 1, No. 3

- I. Allegro con brio
- II. Andante cantabile con variazioni
- III. Menuetto quasi allegro
- IV. Finale prestissimo

As the final piece in Beethoven's first opus, the Piano Trio in C minor reveals how the young composer wanted to present himself to the Viennese musical public. The compositional voice was so bold and distinctive that, when Haydn heard the set premiered at the palace of Beethoven's patron, Count Lichnowsky, he reportedly advised his junior to publish the first two but hold off on the third, as its complex musical language would be too difficult for people to understand. Beethoven, on the other hand, considered the third to be his best, and the three trios were published in 1795 to great commercial success.

The expanded structure and dramatic aesthetic of Beethoven's C minor Trio make it plain to see why it did not align with Haydn's notion of the piano trio as an intimate, domestic genre. From the opening bars of the Allegro con brio, Beethoven explores the turbulent contrasts, sforzando accents, and unexpected modulations that would later characterise middle period works like the Fifth Symphony and the 'Appassionata' Sonata. The remainder of this initial movement traverses an exceptionally wide range of keys for 1795: E-flat to A-flat minor and back again; C-flat (B) Major; C Major; and the 'Neapolitan' key of D-flat, before returning to the home key of C minor.

The Trio's second movement comprises a set of variations based on a slow, hymn-like theme. Initially, these offer respite from the urgency of the opening, but some drama is restored in the rush of the third and fifth variations, as well as in the impassioned cello solo of the fourth. Beethoven resumes playing with contrasts in the brief third movement, which exists on a plane between minuet and scherzo.

In the Prestissimo finale, we revisit the intensity and agitation of the opening, this time offset by a more song-like second theme in the relative major. Further harmonic detours occur before and during the coda, which, despite its rapid pace, is played almost entirely pianissimo, making the meek C Major resolution feel all the more unique and unusual.

Antonín Dvořák – Piano Trio No. 4 in E minor, ‘Dumky’, Op. 90

- I. Lento maestoso — Allegro quasi doppio movimento
- II. Poco adagio — Vivace non troppo — Vivace
- III. Andante — Vivace non troppo — Allegretto
- IV. Andante moderato — Allegretto scherzando — Quasi tempo di marcia
- V. Allegro
- VI. Lento maestoso

By 1892, Dvořák had garnered an international reputation as a Czech nationalist composer, and he was invited to direct the National Conservatory of Music in New York in the hopes that he would help to establish a new ‘American nationalist’ style. Although he remained in this post for only three years, Dvořák had initially expected to settle in the United States permanently, and had delivered an extensive tour of Bohemia and Moravia prior to departing. Accompanied by the violinist Ferdinand Lachner and cellist Hanus Wihan, the centrepiece on this tour was one that Dvořák felt best represented his love for the homeland: the Piano Trio No. 4 in E minor, ‘Dumky’.

‘Dumky’, the plural of ‘dumka’, is a Ukrainian term deriving from *Duma*, an epic Slavic ballad sung traditionally by captive people. In the nineteenth century, as composers from other Slavic nations began to incorporate *Dumy* into their music, ‘dumka’ came to indicate a sorrowful instrumental work interspersed with joyful expressions, such as the *furiant* folk dance. Dvořák used the dumka form in a number of compositions: his Dumka for Solo Piano, op. 35, the String Sextet, op. 48, the Slavonic Dance No. 2, op. 72, and the Piano Quintet, op. 81. However, the best-known example remains his ‘Dumky’ Trio, published by Simrock in Berlin in 1894. As this publication occurred during Dvořák’s tenure in the United States, the composer’s friend Brahms stepped in to check and correct the proofs.

On account of its flexible form, Dvořák’s Trio deviates from the typical structure of late nineteenth-century chamber music, and, at least at a surface level, appears more like a fantasia. The piece consists of six dumky, each in a different key and with distinct characteristics. Yet, the first three episodes are composed in harmonically related keys and are played through without pause, whereas the remaining three are treated as separate, which almost creates the impression of a four-movement work.

Dvořák’s first, second, and third movements, as well as the finale, are all quintessential dumky, in that slow-paced laments are contrasted by faster, more dynamic passages. The fourth and fifth movements, on the other hand, serve as contrasts to each other, like a slow movement followed by a scherzo. In short, while this trio may appear complicated in structure, it is in fact straightforward and familiar, thus creating space for Dvořák to reach new heights of Slavic Romantic expression.

Notes by Madeline Roycroft