

**Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Chamber Music Series
Programme Notes Online**

**Saturday 5 April 2014 7.30pm
St George's Hall Concert Room**

ATOS Trio

JOSEF SUK (1874-1935) Piano Trio in C minor, Op.2

Allegro
Andante
Vivace

Josef Suk, the son-in-law and one-time favourite pupil of Antonín Dvořák, was both one of Bohemia and Czechoslovakia's greatest composers and the second violinist in the renowned Czech Quartet. His Piano Trio in C minor was originally written in 1889, when the 15-year-old Suk was regularly playing in a trio with an amateur cellist called Dr Hersch and his pianist daughter. On the advice of his then teacher at the Prague Conservatory, Karel Stecker, Suk revised it over the next two years and it was performed in 1891 in a concert of works by Stecker's pupils. On beginning his studies with Dvořák, Suk made further changes, including removing an entire movement and refashioning the third movement to make it altogether more playful – Dvořák, it seems, was keen to lighten the palette of his earnest young pupil. Dvořák's interventions notwithstanding, the published version of the work retained its dedication to Karel Stecker.

A series of arresting, accented chords open the first movement, their downward sequential movement immediately answered by a rising figure characterised by a clipped, dotted rhythm. The major-key second subject, introduced by the cello and marked 'expressively', then brings suitably lyrical contrast. The development section makes inventive use of the movement's two themes (Dvořák had helped Suk here) while gradually shifting into the key of C major. The first subject is then heard again (now also in C major), as is the second, before a sprightly little coda leads to the exultant final chords.

The lovely *Andante* has a gentle, almost tango-like lilt. However, dynamic and harmonic contrast comes at the heart of the movement (again this was on the advice of Dvořák) as the rhythm begins to suggest a dance of a more resolute nature. Suk's revised finale, now a *Vivace* in 6/8 time, comprises a fast-moving, staccato figure (in the home key of C minor) and a contrastingly lyrical second subject. Along the way there is playfulness, drama and delightful interplay between the instruments, as well as a few dynamic and harmonic surprises. Dvořák and Stecker made have played their part in its genesis, but this is still a remarkable achievement for a teenager.

BEDŘICH SMETANA (1824-1884) Piano Trio in G minor, Op.15

Moderato assai
Allegro, ma non agitato
Finale: presto

When Smetana's beloved daughter Bedřiška died from scarlet fever in 1855, just a year after the death of her younger sister, the composer was devastated. "Nothing can replace Fritzi [Bedriska], the angel whom death has stolen from us," he wrote. His reaction, however, was to throw himself into his work, the product of which was his dark-hued Piano Trio in G minor, his finest piece thus far. Though less overtly autobiographical than his late String Quartet 'From my Life' (1876), he later acknowledged its inspiration in a letter:

[inset] "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, [Otto] Königlöw, violin, and [Julius] Goltermann, cello. Success – nil. The

critics condemned it of one accord ... a year later we played it to Liszt at my home; he fell round my neck and congratulated my wife on the work.”

Smetana was to become the founding father of Bohemian (or Czech) musical nationalism, but his Piano Trio – one of just four chamber compositions written by the composer – betrays little of what was to come. Instead, his stylistic debt is to Schumann and Liszt, and it is therefore not surprising that the latter so admired the work, even if the critics clearly did not.

At the opening of the first movement the violin leads the way in the guise of a soloist, introducing the passionate first subject on its dark G string. With its mournful chromatic lines and forceful dotted rhythms, the theme is to recur in various guises throughout the work's three movements. As the other instruments enter the intensity builds and the piano gives out the theme *fortissimo*. Calm comes with the gentle second subject, introduced by the cello, and for a while the mood is playful before the music builds to a vigorous climax.

The first movement's central development section begins with a statement of the opening theme, fragments of which are then worked into a complex and highly intense contrapuntal passage. Eventually the music quietens and the other instruments drop out to leave the piano, as if fondly reminiscing, to a tender, Lisztian improvisation. After a pause the two main themes are refrained in turn until the tragic atmosphere is further intensified in a relentlessly accelerating coda.

A scherzo of sorts, the second movement's main theme derives from the opening movement's first subject, here given a nervous, almost haunted quality. Recurrences of this opening material frame two contrasting episodes: the first (marked *Andante*) is a delicate affair, the second is majestic with solemn dotted rhythms reminiscent of a French baroque overture. After the latter episode, the scherzo music once more returns before the movement closes unobtrusively.

Smetana borrowed the finale's rapid *tarantella* theme from his own Piano Sonata in G minor, a work composed in 1846. With its brisk, two-against-three cross rhythms the *tarantella* alternates with a gently lyrical theme (first heard on the cello) that is later transformed into a funeral march. No doubt a reflection of Smetana's anguish, the funeral march nevertheless gives way to a final burst of the *tarantella*, now in the brighter key of G major. Perhaps grief has given way to gratitude.

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904) **Piano Trio No.3 in F minor, Op.65**

Allegro ma non troppo

Allegretto grazioso

Poco adagio

Finale: allegro con brio

Whereas Suk's Piano Trio is an attractive piece of juvenilia and Smetana's the work of a 31-year-old still in thrall to Schumann and Liszt, Dvořák's F minor trio – his third essay in the form – is a work of his early maturity. Though, like so much of Dvořák's music, it betrays the influence of Dvořák's friend and mentor Brahms (in this case, Brahms's F minor Piano Quintet), it is also evident that by 1883, when he wrote the piece, the Czech had found his own unique musical voice. The trio was first performed in October 1883 by violinist Ferdinand Lachner, cellist Alois Neruda and Dvořák himself on the piano. Nevertheless, he subsequently revised it thoroughly prior to its publication.

The death of Dvořák's mother in December 1882 affected the composer profoundly and this is manifest in the trio, a work he had begun to compose just six weeks later, as in the case of Smetana's Piano Trio, seemingly as an act of catharsis. “There is hardly another work in Dvořák's output so sorrowful, sombre and poignant,” wrote Hans-Hubert Schönzeler of the piece. This is certainly true of the stormy, intensely passionate first movement. There are moments of consolation – for example, when the relatively serene second subject emerges in the cello part – but overall, the mood is one of turbulence. In all its storm and stress it is a chamber-music counterpart to the opening movement of Dvořák's roughly contemporaneous masterpiece, his Seventh Symphony in G minor.

Dvořák the nationalist comes to the fore in the second movement, the two outer sections of which resemble a Czech dance known as the *dumka* (Dvořák's next Piano Trio, the so-called ‘Dumky’, was to

consist of a series of such dances). The middle section features longer, more sustained melodic lines (marked 'molto espressivo' – very expressive), though its initially sunny mood is gradually darkened by unsettled, syncopated rhythms. An exact repetition of the *dumka* completes the movement's three-part structure.

Even by the standards of the master-melodist Dvořák, the *Poco adagio* slow movement is one of his most tender and lyrical creations, featuring as it does much exquisite interaction between the two string instruments. The idyll is briefly disturbed by the intervention of a strident, heavily-accented theme but this soon yields to another generous outpouring of lyricism. Eventually a solo passage for the piano, hitherto largely an accompanist to the violin and cello, ushers in a coda that gradually fades to nothing.

The calm is shattered by the onset of the finale. Its main theme is cast in the style of a *furiant*, an exhilarating Czech folk dance characterised by the alternation of two bars of 3/4 with three bars of 2/4 time, and one frequently used by both Dvořák and Smetana. The movement is structured around varying recurrences of the *furiant*, in between of which Dvořák revisits the storm of emotion unleashed in the first movement. Finally however, after the tempo slows for a passage of peaceful valediction, Dvořák strikes a heroic tone with a triumphantly life-affirming, major-key coda.

Anthony Bateman © 2014

As programmes can change at the last minute, the online text may vary slightly from that of the printed version. You may print these programme notes for your personal use without seeking permission, but they may not be reprinted or circulated in any form without the writer's consent. To obtain permission please contact ian.stephens@liverpoolphil.com.