

PSC1279

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GRIEG TRIO

TCHAIKOVSKY · SMETANA · GRIEG



SUPER AUDIO CD

DISC 1

1	Edvard Grieg: Andante con moto	9:12
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	Bedřich Smetana: Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 15	29:40
2	I Moderato assai - Più animato	11:33
3	II Allegro, ma non agitato	8:18
4	III Finale: Presto	9:49

DISC 2

	Peter Tchaikovsky: Piano Trio in A minor, Op. 50	46:34
1	I Pezzo elegiaco. Moderato assai - Allegro giusto	18:39
2	II A. Tema con Variazioni. Andante con moto	1:01
3	Var I	0:56
4	Var II: Più mosso	0:35
5	Var III: Allegro moderato	0:57
6	Var IV: L'istesso tempo (Allegro moderato)	1:07
7	Var V: L'istesso tempo	0:44
8	Var VI: Tempo di Valse	2:45
9	Var VII: Allegro Moderato	1:16
10	Var VIII: Fuga (Allegro moderato)	2:41
11	Var IX: Andante flebile, ma non tanto	3:26
12	Var X: Tempo di Mazurka	1:59
13	Var XI: Moderato	2:23
14	II B. Variazione Finale e Coda. Allegro risoluto e con fuoco - Andante con moto - Lugubre	08:40

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VEBJØRN ANVIK, PIANO
SØLVE SIGERLAND, VIOLIN
ELLEN MARGRETE FLESJØ, CELLO

PIANO TRIOS BY SMETANA, TCHAIKOVSKY AND GRIEG

by Malcolm MacDonald

Inspired by the Prague revolution of 1848, which caused the Hapsburg Empire to take stringent measures against Czech patriots, **Bedřich Smetana** strove in his music to ennoble the culture of his native Bohemia and became renowned, alongside Dvořák, as one of the foremost Czech national composers. Challenging the hegemony of German and Italian opera, he was the first to create a genuine alternative based on his own versions of Czech national themes, most famously in *The Bartered Bride* and *The Kiss*. As an orchestral composer, Smetana was also a prolific writer of orchestral music, notable symphonic poems, such as his patriotic cycle consisting of six such works, *Má vlast* (My fatherland).

Smetana wrote only a few chamber works, but he used the medium to create works of deep personal significance – most famously in his First String Quartet, *From My Life*. But this is equally true of the **Piano Trio in G minor, op.15**, his first chamber composition of consequence. This turbulent and almost confessional work was written in the autumn of 1855, between two tone poems on subjects from past history, *Wallenstein's Camp* and *Haakon Jarl*; but whereas those pieces are like highly-coloured historical dramas, the Trio resembles more the diary of a troubled soul. On 6 September that year Smetana's eldest daughter Bedřiška (Fritzi) had died from scarlet fever, less than five years old. Despite her extreme youth she had shown signs of real musical talent. Smetana and his wife had already, in the first six years of their marriage, endured the deaths of three of their daughters. Moreover, the music school they had opened in Prague was a failure, and Smetana's political activities were making their life in Bohemia increasingly difficult.

As a fine pianist, he had just teamed up with the violinist Otto von Königsłow and the cellist Julius Goltermann to perform concerts together, and the choice of the piano trio medium must have been suggested by this association. The Trio, dedicated to the memory of young Fritzi, was completed in two months. The premiere performance took place 3 December 1855 in the Prague Konvikt Hall, with Smetana and Goltermann as pianist and cellist, though with Antonin Bennewitz as the violin. The work received a warm reception and was soon taken up by Franz Liszt, who admired Smetana's music.

(Smetana had distinguished himself early in his career by his performances of the works of Liszt, Thalberg, and Henselt: this was one reason that Liszt was so reciprocally supportive.)

There are indications in the music that the Trio is not merely a work of personal sorrow; at some level Smetana's grief for his daughter fused with sorrow for the subjugated state of his country, as is shown by the various national references in the music. The whole work is spontaneous and rhapsodic in character, with strong contrasts between its various themes and sections. The *Moderato assai* first movement is by turns pugnacious and grief-stricken. It opens strikingly, with an improvisatory-sounding violin solo whose opening bar presents a motif, chromatically descending through the interval of a fifth, that is used to unify all three movements. This sad, wide-ranging solo violin melody, with its dolorous chromatic inflections, is soon joined by a counter-theme from the cello, and by a rich chordal accompaniment in the piano. The second subject, given to the cello at its first appearance, is more tranquil, with a lulling, lilting rhythm and a folk-song character. The stormy, strenuous development issues in an expressive, musing cadenza for the piano, joined towards the end by the solo violin to lead into the tragically-accented recapitulation and wild coda.

Unusually, the Trio has no slow movement as such, slow music only occurring in episodes of the other two movements. The second movement, marked *Allegro ma non agitato*, is a scherzo in a subdued and fretful polka rhythm (Smetana was a master of the Polka as a Czech folk dance, just as Dvořák was of the Furiant.) The main dance-tune is a transformation of the violin's theme from the start of the first movement. There are two trios, marked 'Alternativo I' and 'Alternativo II': the first of these serves as a gentler, introspective interlude, while the second, with its tragic dotted rhythms, has rather the character of a funeral march.

The *Presto* finale begins urgently with a theme that derives from a Czech popular song, *S'il jsem proso na souvrati* (I was sowing millet). The tune clearly had a special significance for Smetana: it had been an unofficial school song at his childhood grammar school and a rallying cry of the Young Czech nationalist movement. He had already used it as the basis of his *Characteristic Variations on a Czech Folksong* for violin and piano (1843) and as the main theme of the finale of his Piano Sonata of 1846, which

like the Trio is in the key of G minor. A nostalgic second subject and some floridly melancholic piano writing lead to a defiant resumption of the *Presto* theme, but the movement eventually slows to a funeral-march transformation of the folksong theme marked *Grave*, *quasi-marcia*, which is clearly Smetana's final outpouring of grief for his daughter and his country. This rises in a spirit of impassioned song before a final return to the *Presto* tempo, by means of which the work is able to secure an abrupt, but more hopeful, ending in G major.

Like Smetana, **Tchaikovsky** wrote comparatively little chamber music, yet his **Piano Trio in A minor**, with its kaleidoscopic succession of moods, is probably the first important work in the genre by a Russian composer; and it proved very influential. Up to his forties Tchaikovsky had felt an antipathy to the piano-trio combination, and had refused to write one for his patroness, Nadezhda von Meck (whose resident piano trio included, as pianist, a French teenager called Claude Debussy). The occasion that caused Tchaikovsky to change his attitude was the death in March 1881 of the pianist and pedagogue Nikolai Rubinstein, founder of the Moscow Conservatoire, who had not only been a friend but one of his sternest critics and most faithful supporters. Deeply affected by losing this significant figure in his life, for a while Tchaikovsky seemed quite unable to compose. He planned a new opera, but then found himself composing the Piano Trio as a tribute to Rubinstein's memory – the dedication actually reads 'in memory of a great artist'. Tchaikovsky told Countess von Meck that he selected the genre as a means of 'testing himself', perhaps in order to assure himself that he was still fulfilling Rubinstein's exacting standards.

The Trio was composed in Rome during the winter of 1881-2; Tchaikovsky wrote to his brother Anatoli that he was 'completely engrossed in my new trio, and attracted by this new form of music which I have not tried before'. After he had finished it he wrote again that 'it pleases me greatly. Later, maybe, I shall renounce it, and hate it as much as I hate most of my works. At the moment, however, I am proud of it, it satisfies me, and raises me in my own esteem. Lately I felt sure I should not be able to compose any more and life without creative work is pretty pointless.'

Certainly the Trio is a big, ambitious piece in which the composer sets himself a multitude of challenges in what was for him an unfamiliar medium. After a private

performance in April 1882 Tchaikovsky made some revisions before the public premiere, which took place at the Moscow Conservatoire on 18 October with Sergei Taneyev playing the taxing piano part. The work was not well received by the press, but did not take long to make its way into the repertoire, where it stands to this day as one of the supreme examples of the piano trio in the Romantic era. Tchaikovsky later sanctioned substantial cuts in its formidable length.

The expansive and passionate first movement, subtitled 'Pezzo elegiaco', brims with melodic ideas; it begins with a lyrical tune entrusted to the cello which produces many offshoots in the course of a lengthy exposition. Contrasting with this is a heroic, even martial theme distinguished by massive chordal writing in the piano – indeed the piano part throughout this Trio often resembles the solo part in a concerto. The development section includes a substantial dialogue between cello and piano, and in the coda the opening theme turns elegiac, with a tender duet for violin and cello before the movement finds its calm, sad close.

The slow movement is a Theme and Variations, a form of which Tchaikovsky was already an established master. This E major movement is perhaps the most personal and unusual in inspiration of all his variation-sets. He associated the poised and almost classical theme – first stated by the piano – with Rubinstein himself, and the ensuing eleven variations chronicle incidents in Rubinstein's life and memories of times he and Tchaikovsky spent together. As the composer wrote to his half-brother Modest, 'one variation is a memory of a trip to an Amusement Park out of town, another of a ball to which we both went and so on'. The Amusement Park is probably to be heard in the quicksilver scherzo of the third variation, the ball in the sixth variation's sumptuous waltz – which also refers to Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*. But it is better not to look for particular 'programmatic' connotations in the others. The brief fifth variation, with its high piano writing, is clearly a brilliant evocation of a musical box, according to some commentators – but a 'troika' or sleigh-ride, according to others. The eighth is a robust fugue, followed by a lamenting ninth variation marked *flebile* (mourning, plaintive) with Aeolian-harp figuration in the piano, and a tenth in lively mazurka rhythm. The eleventh variation closes the movement with an enriched restatement of the original theme.

Though the second movement is over, the variation process is not. Tchaikovsky's third movement opens with what is, in effect, the twelfth variation in the sequence – a splendidly exciting and vivacious one, large and bold enough to initiate a full-scale finale in A major. It enacts a more or less complete sonata design before its triumphal elation is interrupted by the return of the soulful lyric theme that began the 'Pezzo elegiaco' first movement, in drastically afflicted unison on the strings against a turbulently emotional piano part. This sudden outpouring of grief issues in a doom-laden coda marked *lugubre*, where the opening theme is heard for the last time against a Chopinesque funeral-march rhythm in the piano, ebbing away into silence.

While the trios of Smetana and Tchaikovsky became celebrated in their composers' lifetimes, **Edvard Grieg**'s only essay in the genre was unknown and only posthumously published. Completed, according to the date on the manuscript, on 17 June 1878, the **Andante con moto in C minor** is a substantial piece apparently intended as the slow movement of a multi-movement piano trio, though in fact its contrasts of character and alternation of slow with faster tempi make it an effective single-movement work. It is certainly no sketch or draft but a fully-realized piece in every aspect, and of a quality comparable to Grieg's other, better known, chamber compositions.

In the evocative opening two elements are introduced: a dragging rhythm of repeated chords, first given to double-stopped strings, and a soulful piano melody of typical Griegian pathos and folk inflection, which is soon taken up by the strings while the piano takes over the dragging rhythm. A livelier, almost spring-like second theme, also introduced by the piano, soon builds up into a more dramatic and passionate middle section with virtuoso piano figuration. This leads to a *fortissimo* return of the opening theme in an ardent outpouring that involves all three players. The tonality then brightens to C major and the second theme is recalled in *dolce* vein; but the mood darkens and the tonality reverts to C minor for a coda that starts hectically but is broken off in mid-phrase, after which the work concludes in brooding melancholy.

GRIEG TRIO

The Grieg Trio was founded in 1987 and studied with András Mihály, Norbert Brainin and Eli Goren.

Among numerous awards, the Grieg Trio won 1st prize at the 1989 Colmar International Chamber Music Competition in France, the Parkhouse Award (England) 1991, the Norwegian Music Critics Prize 1993/94 and Spellemannprisen (Norway) 2004.

The Grieg Trio has achieved widespread international recognition, with performances in most European countries, the United States, Japan and New Zealand, in major venues such as Chatelet, Concertgebouw, Schauspielhaus, Salle Verdi and Weill Hall, Carnegie Hall and Lincoln Center.

They have been engaged by Wigmore Hall and Berlin Konzerthaus for their Series "Beethoven +", consisting of Beethoven's Piano Trios combined with commissions by contemporary composers. Engagements also include international festivals like Menuhin Festival Gstaad (Switzerland), Bad Kissingen and Schwetzingen (Germany), Delft and Orlando Festival (Holland), Bath (England), Helsinki and Kuhmo (Finland), Bergen and Oslo (Norway).

The Grieg Trio has recorded works by Beethoven, Mendelssohn – Bartholdy, Schumann, Brahms, Dvorak, Shostakovich, Martin and Bloch for Simax Classics and Virgin to great critical acclaim.

From 2004 they are the artistic directors of the International Chamber Music Festival in Stavanger.

Ellen M. Flesjø plays a cello by Claude Pierray (1714), kindly loaned by Kaare Berntsen AS. Sølve Sigerland plays a violin by Giovanni Battista Guadagnini (Milan 1752), kindly loaned by Dextra Musica AS.





PSC 1069

Felix Mendelssohn-Bartoldy: Piano Trio no.1, D minor, op. 49 · Piano Trio no.2, C minor, op. 68
- *the most engaging performances I have ever heard of any chamber music.* [Fanfare]



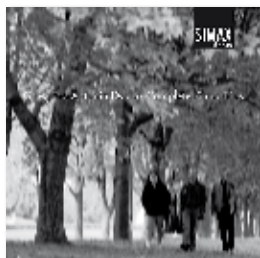
PSC 1099

Johannes Brahms:
Piano Trios nos. 1, op. 8 · no.2, op. 87
- *Eine Aufnahme, die wirklich Maßstäbe setzt.* [Fono Forum]



PSC 1147

Dmitri Shostakovich: Piano Trios nos. 1 & 2
Frank Martin: Trio over Irish Folk tunes
Ernest Bloch: Three Nocturnes
- *Intensity, flawless technique, and deeply shaped phrases characterize the Grieg Trio here.* [American Record Guide]



PSC 1256

Antonín Dvořák: Complete Piano Trios (2 CD)
- *The Norwegian musicians sing their way through the four trios with honeyed mellifluousness and Brahmsian colouring. The blend and teamwork among the musicians is superb. [...] for sheer autumnal pleasure, the Grieg Trio seem to be in a class of their own.* [International Record Review]



VOL1 / PSC 1165

Ludwig van Beethoven: Trio in c minor, op. 1 · Variations in G major on the song 'Ich bin der Schneider Kakadu' · Trio for piano, violin and cello in Bb major · **Jouni Kaipainen:** Trio III, op. 29 for violin, cello and piano (1986-87)
- *alert, spirited performances and a programme that seems to highlight Beethoven's originality by placing it next to an inventive modern work.* [Gramophone]



VOL3 / PSC 1167

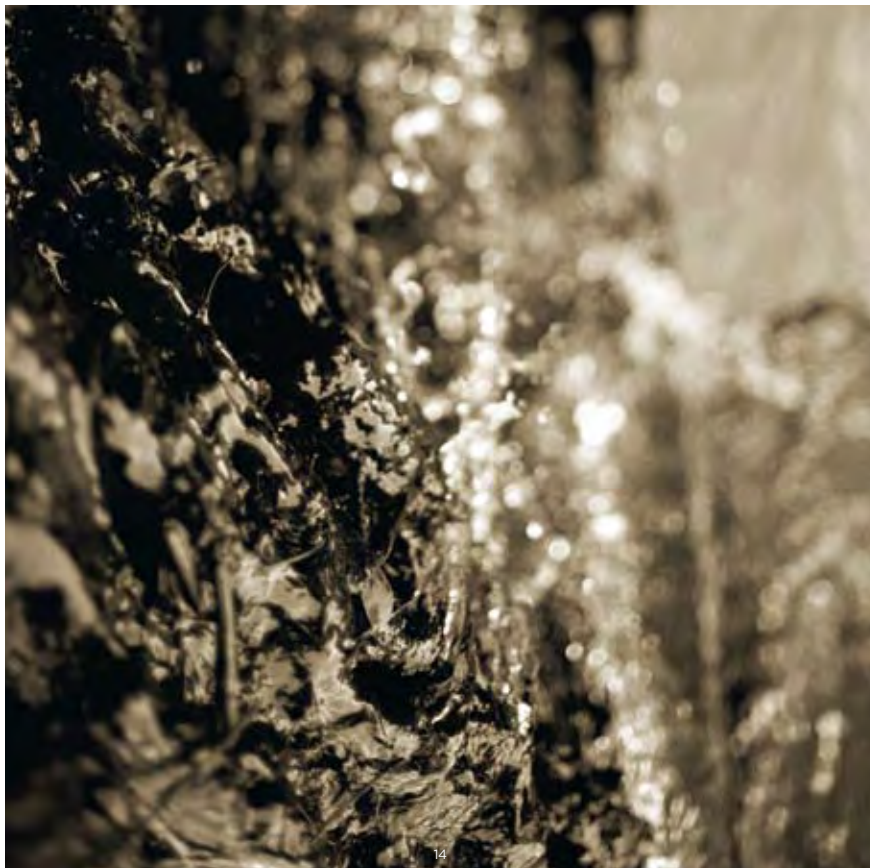
Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Trio op. 97 'Archduke'
Lasse Thoresen: The Descent of Luminous Waters
- *Le Trio Grieg est un ensemble soudé qui présente une interprétation rafraîchissante et convaincante du chef d'œuvre de Beethoven. Tout est en place et bien équilibré, les trois musiciens possèdent une approche commune qui est très satisfaisante stylistiquement. [...] Les artistes savent manier ce langage avec agilité et intensité et l'on sent à nouveau une symbiose réussie, mariant une puissante pulsation rythmique et une variété de nuances afin de rendre pleinement la chatoiemment électrique de cette musique qui se refuse d'intégrer le monde de la musique abstraite.* [Pizzicato]



VOL2 / PSC 1166

Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Trio no. 2, op. 1 · Piano Trio no. 4 op. 70 'Ghost' · **Sir Peter Maxwell Davies:** Voyage to Fair Isle
- *My impression of this excellently recorded performance is that A Voyage to Fair Isle is played here with the maximum possible expressivity.* [International Record Review]

- *The trio plays Beethoven's op. 70 no. 1 with the infectious vitality it brought to op. 1 no. 1, but now with a greater breath and intensity. The slow movement is an emotional tour de force. The sound is warm, forward and nicely balanced.* [The Strad]



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