

Dvořák – Piano Trios in F minor (op. 65) and E minor (op. 90)

Antonin Dvořák is considered to be the most significant Czech composer of the nineteenth century, although he was certainly not the only prominent composer of that period from that area of Europe. Bedřich Smetana and Zdeněk Fibich also enjoyed a great reputation. Nonetheless, Dvořák's fame soon became unparalleled, in the first place probably because his music is such a successful synthesis of Czech - or, more accurately, Bohemian - folk music and Western techniques. And no doubt also because Dvořák was such a 'natural' composer: his music sounds so self-evident, so natural, music such as in Western Europe only Schubert was known for. It was precisely this aspect of Dvořák's art of which Brahms was rightly jealous.

On the other hand, Dvořák had such huge admiration for his older German-Viennese colleague, who had helped him so much and had even organized the first publication of his first volume of *Slavonic Dances*, that in his 7th *Symphony*, for example, he quoted a melody from Brahms' 2nd *Piano Concerto*. In terms of form Dvořák's music does indeed belong totally within the Western tradition: we can draw a straight line from Mozart to him, via Schubert and Brahms, Schubert being the most important composer of songs and folksong-like melodies, and Brahms being above all the master builder, the direct heir of Beethoven.

And yet neither of these possessed that special quality which made Dvořák so unique, namely the ability to write totally natural melodies, which at one and the same time, and in all modesty, were capable of accompanying another melody, but also, just as easily and entirely independently, of producing amazing contrapuntal constructions, and, on top of all that, of inviting everyone to dance. Brahms once remarked with some envy that he wished he could even write a tune such as Dvořák could write just for an accompanying voice...

Ultimately Dvořák was a particularly engaging man, for whom human relations, love of friends and colleagues, loyalty and intense

emotions were central to everything he did and didn't do. In that respect he was much more gregarious than 'the hedgehog' Brahms. In their mutual friendship Dvořák enjoyed the fact that in his presence Brahms was more cheerful and relaxed than otherwise. In a letter to Simrock in 1883 he wrote that, when Brahms was in such a good mood, he could definitely love him; he is pleased with the role that he can fulfil in that way for Brahms. It is that intense, warm-hearted and usually good-humoured quality which Dvořák's music exudes.

Although in the first instance Dvořák established his name with various folk music arrangements, such as the two volumes of *Slavonic Dances*, and with orchestral works such as his 7th and 8th *Symphonies*, he was able to let his hair down rather more in his many chamber music compositions, which combine Czech nationalism, clever constructivism and intimate, often very personal expressions of his emotions. His string quartets illustrate this, (and certainly not only the over-familiar *Quartet in F major*, nicknamed the 'American', or, in earlier times, the 'Nigger' Quartet), but so, to an even greater degree, do his four surviving *Piano Trios* (two early trios were lost).

He wrote his *Piano Trio in B flat major, op. 21*, in a flurry of creative enthusiasm, roughly at the same time as the popular *Serenade for Strings, op. 22*. And the deeply tragic *Piano Trio in G minor, op. 26* was created shortly after the sudden death of his oldest daughter Josefa. In the later trios he also strikes a personal note. The great *Piano Trio in F minor, op. 65*, is his reaction to the overwhelming experience of the death of his mother at the end of 1882, but equally to the - for him unexpected - fame which came his way after Brahms had recommended his first volume of *Slavonic Dances* to the publisher Simrock. And finally, the *Piano Trio in E minor, op. 90*, forms the perfect synthesis between the national and the personal, between Dvořák the famous Czech and Dvořák the great human being, between lamentations and swirling dances.

The *Piano Trio in F minor* of 1883 is, together with his *7th Symphony* of 1884, the most Brahmsian music that ever flowed from Dvořák's pen. In the first movement (*Allegro ma non troppo*) the grand style, the clever technique involving two contrasting themes and a dramatic development, plus the intense, more generally Slavic-tinted lyricism, are closely linked to the chamber music of his German-Viennese master, so greatly revered by Dvořák. (Think, for instance, of the gypsy music in Brahms' *Piano Quartet in G minor*.) Dvořák had indeed taken great pains, and created various different versions of the work, to ensure that form and content were as closely fused as possible, and to curb as well as he could the personal emotions he was struggling with at that time.

In the charming *Allegro grazioso*, with its splendidly contrasting and somewhat melancholy trio, the Czech style is still totally evident. The elegiac slow movement (*Poco adagio*) begins with a beautiful cello melody of the sort that he would also go on to write in the *Trio in E minor*, the *8th Symphony*, the great *Cello Concerto* and in many chamber works (including the *Dumky Trio*), and all that despite the fact that on many occasions he expressed his aversion to the cello as a solo instrument. The finale (*Allegro con brio*) is composed of a fast *furiant* in $\frac{3}{4}$ time which alternates and contrasts with a more lilting theme somewhat resembling a waltz. In terms of form the finale is a rondo in which the *furiant* theme constantly returns.

The *Piano Trio in E minor* is in several respects a special work. Not only because it is the last of Dvořák's piano trios, and one of his best-loved chamber works (together with the *String Quartet in F major*), but above all because of the unusual form this composition takes. This is, after all, no standard work in three or four movements, but consists of six distinctive sections, each based on a Slavic lamentation or 'dumka', a form originating in the Ukraine. What reason or event gave rise to Dvořák's attraction to the 'dumka' is unclear. Janáček once suggested that the underlying meaning of the word 'dumka', i.e. a floating thought, something which has stuck in the

memory since childhood, was particularly applicable to Dvořák (as it was to himself). For Dvořák its general Slavic character was probably also an important motivation, (he was, after all, a supporter of Pan-Slavism), or perhaps its recurring contrasts between elegy and dance.

Each separate 'dumka' in the *Piano Trio in E minor* (with the exception of the fifth movement) also consists of a slow lamentation and a fast, often swirling dance-like section. At the same time, within the overall structure Dvořák viewed the first three sections (*Lento maestoso-Allegro quasi doppio movimento, Poco adagio-Vivace, ma non troppo* and *Andante-Vivace non troppo-Andante-Allegretto*) as a whole – they are to be performed without interruption – as if they formed the first movement of a more traditionally constructed piece of chamber music. The following three sections can then be interpreted as the slow movement (*Andante moderato-Allegretto scherzando*), the scherzo (*Allegro*) and the finale (*Lento maestoso-Vivace*).

The *Dumky Trio*, as the piece was called from the start, received its first performance on April 11, 1891 in Prague, with the violinist Ferdinand Lachner, the cellist Hanuš Wihan and the composer at the piano. During this concert Dvořák received an honorary doctorate. The presence of the cellist Wihan must have inspired Dvořák, since in the *Dumky Trio* he assigned several beautiful solos to the cello, and some years later he wrote the great *Cello Concerto in B minor* for him. The interplay between the cello and the piano and violin is also of great intensity and variety. Ultimately it is above all the recognizability and simplicity of the splendid melodies that have, ever since its first performance, conferred on the *Dumky Trio* its unceasing popularity.

Leo Samama, 2008