SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Alisa Weilerstein: Beethoven's Archduke Trio

Sunday 30 November 2025, 6pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Rachmaninov Trio élégiaque No.1 in G minor	15'
Ravel Piano Trio in A minor	27'
Interval	
Beethoven Piano Trio in B flat, Op.97 (Archduke)	40'

Performers

Stefan Jackiw *violin*
Alisa Weilerstein *cello*
Inon Barnatan *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours. There is a 20-minute interval.

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Trio élégiaque No.1 in G minor (1892)

The immediate question raised by an 'elegiac trio' is surely: who died? In the case of the *Trio élégiaque* No.1 that the 18-year-old Sergei Rachmaninov wrote in 1892 – in the space of just four days – the answer is: nobody. Definitely not Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, who's sometimes suggested as the figure that Rachmaninov's rich, evocative, single-movement Trio sets out to memorialise. In 1892, Tchaikovsky was very much alive, and indeed acting as something of a mentor to the young Rachmaninov at the Moscow Conservatoire.

Rachmaninov had begun his studies at the St Petersburg Conservatoire (in 1883, aged just ten), but had been so lazy and mischievous that his mother moved him to the far stricter Moscow Conservatoire, where he'd study piano with the notorious disciplinarian Nikolai Zverev. The decision clearly paid off: not only would Rachmaninov later win the Conservatoire's Great Gold Medal, but he also forged formative relationships with some of the most influential Russian musicians of the time: Anton Arensky (who taught him harmony), Sergei Taneyev (who taught him counterpoint) and Tchaikovsky. That elder composer had long since ended his formal teaching at the institution, but he kept closely in touch with its comings and goings, and maintained a friendly and supportive interest in the teenage Rachmaninov. For his part, Rachmaninov virtually idolised the fatherly Tchaikovsky, later describing him as 'the greatest and most sincere artist I have ever known'.

So when new music was needed for a chamber performance pre-arranged for 30 January 1892, Rachmaninov quickly created his *Trio élégiaque* No.1, not as a memorial to a deceased Tchaikovsky, but as a tribute to his living friend and mentor, taking inspiration from the opening movement of Tchaikovsky's own Piano Trio in A minor, called *Pezzo elegiaco* (Elegiac Piece). He even wove a semi-hidden quotation from Tchaikovsky into the *Trio élégiaque*'s very musical fabric: the distinctive four-note rising theme that opens the piece is the same as the four falling notes that begin the elder composer's famous First Piano Concerto, only played backwards. It is a very public mark of respect and gratitude that can't have been lost on Conservatoire listeners at the Trio's first performance. Violin and cello later introduce a more overtly Romantic melody, and after the shifting moods of a complex central development section, both themes return, taking the piece inexorably towards its sombre closing funeral march in music that seems increasingly drained of life and vigour.

Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

Piano Trio in A minor (1914)

1 Modéré
2 Pantoum: Assez vif
3 Passacaille: Très large
4 Final: Animé

A bit more than two decades after Rachmaninov created tonight's opening piece, Europe felt like it was teetering towards major conflict. If France was going to be involved – as seemed inevitable – the 39-year-old Maurice Ravel felt it his patriotic duty to join his country's armed forces. After his nation entered the First World War, however, Ravel found that his age, his small stature and his notoriously fragile health scuppered his hopes of serving in the French Air Force. Instead, he was signed up as a lorry and ambulance driver on the Verdun front, where he would encounter suffering and death that would haunt him, and his music, for the rest of his life.

What does any of that have to do with tonight's next piece? Ravel's sole Piano Trio was the final major work that he completed before the conflict detonated across Europe and beyond, and tore through Ravel's own life and outlook. And it arguably represents the final flowering of a sensual, exuberant, even magical side to his music that would shift towards poignant wistfulness and regret following the conflict, in the aching reserve of *Le tombeau de Couperin* or the cataclysmic turmoil of *La valse*, for example.

Indeed, Ravel was keen to get his Piano Trio out of the way so that he could join the military. He had been planning the piece for several years ('I've written my Trio. Now all I need are its themes,' he had earlier quipped to his student Maurice Delage) and ultimately compressed its composition into a hectic summer of writing in the Basque fishing town of Saint-Jean-de-Luz, just across the bay from his birthplace of Ciboure. 'The idea that I should be leaving at once made me get through five months' work in five weeks!' he wrote to fellow composer Igor Stravinsky in September 1914. 'My Trio is finished.'

The Piano Trio's own Basque birthplace is hardly coincidental. Its dreamy opening movement draws heavily on the region's music: the opening theme – first heard wistfully in the piano – is based on the unusual, irregular rhythm of the Basque *zortziko* dance, before a far more fragile, plaintive second theme from the violin and cello. The playfully scampering second movement is titled *Pantoum* in reference to a South East Asian verse form (properly *pantun*) that was popular with French poets, whereby the second and fourth lines of one stanza become the first and third lines of the next. Accordingly, Ravel develops and transforms the movement's two contrasting themes – a spiky, brittle piano melody and a far smoother, more voluptuous string theme – simultaneously.

Ravel's slow third movement is a passacaglia, built on a repeating bassline heard in the piano's left hand right at the start, that builds to a powerful climax before retreating again. And after its glistening opening texture – which draws all the sonic magic it can from the three instruments – the finale fizzes with pyrotechnics and cascades with watery evocations in just the sort of exuberant musical magic that Ravel would move away from in his later works.

Find out more

- Alisa Weilerstein
- Stefan Jackiw
- Inon Barnatan
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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Piano Trio in B flat, Op.97 (Archduke) (1811)

1 Allegro moderato
2 Scherzo: Allegro
3 Andante cantabile, ma però con moto –
4 Allegro moderato

If tonight's opening piece represented the fruit of a warm and supportive friendship, then the concert's final work offers – well, something quite similar. Though the close, respectful, trusting and long-lasting relationship between Ludwig van Beethoven and Archduke Rudolph of Austria – dedicatee of Beethoven's *Archduke* Trio, hence its nickname – was far from customary for the infamously irascible, impatient, quick-tempered composer.

As the youngest of the 16 children of Holy Roman Emperor Leopold II, Archduke Rudolph was somewhat on the periphery of royal affairs, and devoted his life to two big passions: religion and music. He was ultimately ordained a priest and elevated to the role of Archbishop of Olmütz (now Olomouc in Czechia) in 1819. But he began exploring his musical passions more than a decade earlier when, as a 16-year-old, he began piano and composition lessons with Beethoven in 1803. It was hardly a straightforward relationship – quite apart from class-crossing sensitivities, Beethoven was notorious for cancelling lessons at the last minute, grumbling about the strictures of royal etiquette, and even daring to reprimand his pupil if he hadn't worked hard enough. For his part, Rudolph seemed to appreciate Beethoven's visionary abilities: he not only tolerated the composer's unpredictable moods, but also established an exhaustive library of Beethoven's music. And, crucially, he offered the composer unwavering financial support, which Beethoven recognised by dedicating several works to him, including today's Trio, the Piano Concerto No.5 and the *Hammerklavier* Sonata. The apparently genuine warmth between the two men is demonstrated in Beethoven's dedication of his monumental *Missa solemnis* to his patron: 'From the heart – may it go to the heart.'

It's perhaps not surprising, then, that Beethoven would recognise his friend and supporter in such a warm-hearted, confident, boundingly positive Trio – described at its premiere as a 'symphony for three instruments' by fellow composer Louis Spohr, who recognised the piece's grand, almost orchestral ambitions. There's an immediate sense of contentment and expansiveness to the piano's opening theme in the first movement, later contrasted with a quicker, perkier idea that begins in the violin and cello. The playful second movement is more exploratory, lining up a bouncing, energetic main melody against a strangely slippery, slithering theme in its central section. Beethoven's slow third movement is a set of progressively elaborate variations on its opening hymn-like melody, and he closes with a jaunty, increasingly wild Hungarian-style finale, which he specifically noted should be delivered with energy and force.