

History of the Russian Piano Trio • 1

ALYABIEV • GLINKA RUBINSTEIN

The Brahms Trio



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Alexander ALYABIEV (1787–1851)

Piano Trio in E flat major (1815) • Piano Trio in A minor (1834)

Mikhail GLINKA (1804–1857)

Trio pathétique in D minor

Anton RUBINSTEIN (1829–1894)

Piano Trio in G minor, Op. 15, No. 2

The piano trio holds an important place in the history of Russian chamber music, even though few composers wrote more than one. While some make reasonably frequent appearances in concert and on recordings, many others are far too rarely heard, but following the development of the genre is to accompany the fascinating history of Russian music in the 19th century.

The history of the piano trio in Russia effectively begins with Alexander Alexandrovich Alyabiev (1787–1851), who was one of the most significant composers in Russia before Glinka. His talent became apparent early on, and he was extremely versatile, writing music for vaudevilles and operas and becoming a specialist in folk music of various kinds – he acquired this knowledge during a time of political exile, only being allowed to return to live in Moscow under the supervision of the police. Like Mikhail Glinka, Alyabiev was a student of the Irish composer John Field, who lived and worked in Russia for many years, and his operatic compositions in many ways laid the foundations for the future flourishing of the genre in Russia initiated by Glinka.

Alyabiev was also a prolific composer of chamber music, and wrote the earliest surviving Russian string quartets. The *Trio in E flat major* is an unfinished work, but a performing edition of the single surviving movement was made by the musicologist Boris Dobrokhotov, a specialist in Alyabiev's work. It is both elegant and vivacious, in sonata form; the dramatic development section modulating as far away as E major. One can only regret the absence of the movements that might have followed it. The *Trio in A minor* is, fortunately, complete. It is a substantial three-movement work, balancing Classical poise and the kind of yearning Romanticism one would expect of a pupil of Field. Though not achieving the virtuosic heights of pianism that the later

trios of Rubinstein would display, Alyabiev's writing for the piano is not without its challenges, particularly in the first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*. The lovely *Adagio* that follows emphasises rather more the lyrical qualities of the violin and cello, while the folk dance-like *Rondo*, at once humorous and gracefully charming, exploits a sparkling interplay between all three instruments.

In spite of the contributions of Alyabiev and others, it is generally Mikhail Glinka (1804–1857) who is viewed as the first great Russian composer of art music. Indeed, he himself expressed the aim of writing genuinely national music, though this would only really happen with his opera *Zhizn' za tsarya* ('A Life for the Tsar', 1836), and the way had certainly been prepared by Alyabiev's work in opera, mixing as it did folk melodies from Russia and elsewhere with the Italian style then in vogue. Though it is largely for his operas that Glinka is famous, he also composed a substantial number of orchestral and chamber works, and was a prolific and inspired songwriter. His 'Russian nationalist' style in fact had its roots in his cosmopolitan musical education in Milan and Berlin: what he learnt abroad he brought back to his native country and applied it in order to develop this new style. He later also travelled to France, Spain and Poland, dying in Berlin in 1857 while studying the techniques of Western Renaissance composers.

Glinka's highly Romantic *Piano Trio in D minor*, with the title '*Pathétique*', was written in 1832 and originally scored for clarinet, bassoon and piano. It bears a French inscription: 'Je n'ai connu l'amour que par les peines qu'il cause!' ('I have only known love through the sorrow it causes!'), which is generally presumed to be a reference to the composer's uncertain love life. The version for violin,

cello and piano was made by the renowned Czech violinist Jan Hřimalý, who taught at the Moscow Conservatoire.

The *Trio* is cast in four movements, of which the third and fourth perhaps most obviously justify the inscription on the cover. After a robust first movement, whose declamatory opening phrase immediately arrests one's attention, comes a brief and lively *Scherzo* and *Trio*. It is with the third movement, an expansive *Largo*, that we reach the work's tragic heart. It is of a song-like character, and exploits the lyrical qualities of both violin and cello to the maximum: each has a long and eloquent disquisition, highly ornamented, before a final section – *Maestoso risoluto* – in which the piano assumes the dominant role in an affecting three-way conversation. The finale, *Allegro con spirito*, is brief and ends unexpectedly, but it seems to take the tragic character of the third movement into the realm of agitated desperation, and this, together with its restating of the themes of the first three movements, makes it a fitting conclusion indeed.

Anton Rubinstein cast his shadow over Russian music during the entire second half of the 19th century. He was prodigiously gifted, and as well as composer and virtuoso pianist he was a highly influential teacher, founding the St Petersburg Conservatoire in 1862. He put himself at odds with nationalist trends in Russia, however, by declaring that music could not be a vehicle for a national style, a stance wholly unacceptable to other composers such as Balakirev. He similarly took a stance against what he saw as musical amateurism, and his founding of the Conservatoire led

Balakirev to begin a rival institution, the Free School of Music, in 1862.

Rubinstein produced a monumental amount of music, including fourteen operas and oratorios, six symphonies, ten string quartets and no fewer than five piano trios. It is thought that the first was written in 1851, but it was only published four years later, together with the second, by Hofmeister in Leipzig. The second is cast in four movements, the first being a highly dramatic but lyrical *Moderato* in sonata form. The virtuosic quality of the rippling piano part, especially in the development section, reminds one of Rubinstein's own prowess as a pianist, but he was also a fine melodist: the second theme is particularly beautiful. It is followed by a magnificently lyrical *Adagio* in D major, which in some senses recalls the character of the *Largo* of Glinka's *Trio*, but with the elaborately acrobatic piano writing characteristic of Rubinstein.

The third movement, an *Allegro assai* in a very chromatically inflected G major, is a real firework, taking the listener on an unpredictably wild dance, and the finale, *Moderato*, is characterised not only by its melodic memorability but by the extraordinary variety of its textures. There can be no doubt that this work is a major contribution to the piano trio literature, and not only in the context of Russia: Rubinstein must be considered a gifted and original composer of chamber music which deserves a much more prominent position on the world stage.

Ivan Moody

The Brahms Trio

The Brahms Trio is one of the leading Russian chamber ensembles, comprising violinist Nikolai Sachenko and cellist Kirill Rodin, both winners of the Gold Medal at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, and pianist Natalia Rubinstein, First Prize winner of the Joseph Joachim Chamber Music Competition in Weimar and founder of the ensemble. Since its foundation in 1990, the trio has regularly appeared at prestigious international concert venues, such as the Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, the Brucknerhaus Linz and Seoul Arts Center, as well as at festivals in Melbourne, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Copenhagen, Paris and London. Legendary musicians such as Tatiana Gaidamovich, Alexander Bonduriansky (Moscow Trio), Valentin Berlinsky (Borodin Quartet) and Rudolf Barshai have had a significant influence on the formation of the performing style and career of the trio. The Brahms Trio has made an invaluable contribution to enlarging the chamber repertoire by rediscovering unknown piano trios of Russian composers of the late 19th and early 20th century. The musicians of The Brahms Trio are professors at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory, and are the recipients of the honorary title Honoured Artist of Russia. www.brahms-trio.ru



Photo by Emil Matveev

The piano trio holds an important place in the history of Russian chamber music and to follow the development of the genre is to accompany the fascinating history of Russian music in the 19th century. Its beginnings can be found with Alexander Alyabiev, a student of John Field, whose unfinished but elegant and vivacious *Piano Trio in E flat major* is paired with the yearning Romanticism of the *Piano Trio in A minor*. Mikhail Glinka's *Trio pathétique* bears the inscription 'I have only known love through the sorrow it causes!', while Anton Rubinstein's elaborately acrobatic piano writing in his *Piano Trio in G minor* reminds us of his own virtuosity, and reveals his magnificent skills as a melodist.

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Alexander ALYABIEV (1787–1851)		5	I. Allegro moderato	5:27
1 Piano Trio in E flat major (1815) 10:04		6	II. Scherzo: Vivacissimo	3:26
Piano Trio in A minor (1834) 18:43		7	III. Largo	4:44
2 I. Allegro ma non troppo 7:10		8	IV. Allegro con spirito	2:11
3 II. Adagio 3:44		Anton RUBINSTEIN (1829–1894)		
4 III. Rondo: Allegretto 7:47		Piano Trio in G minor,		
Mikhail GLINKA (1804–1857)		Op. 15, No. 2 (1851) 30:54		
Trio pathétique in D minor (1832)		9	I. Moderato	9:32
(arr. Jan Hřimalý, 1844–1915,		10	II. Adagio	8:46
for piano trio) 15:48		11	III. Allegro assai	4:20
		12	IV. Moderato	8:09

The Brahms Trio Nikolai Sachenko, Violin • Kirill Rodin, Cello Natalia Rubinstein, Piano

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