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Gabriel Fauré (1845 - 1924) Piano Trio in D minor, Op.120 (1922/3)

Allegro, ma non troppo

Andantino

Allegro vivo

Although Fauré is best known for his vocal writing, in particular his songs and Requiem, he also wrote chamber music throughout his life: two sonatas each for violin and cello with piano, a piano trio, a string quartet, two piano quartets and two piano quintets. The piano trio dates from the last years of his life, together with the second piano quintet and the string quartet. By then he suffered from cacophonous hearing – although mid-range notes were heard at their correct pitch, high notes sounded a 3rd too low and low notes a 3rd too high. Perhaps for this reason the piano trio generally occupies the tonal middle-ground, eschewing extremes of pitch.

Fauré's career had not been straightforward. Born to a family of minor aristocrats in southern France, he was sent aged 9 to board at Niedermeyer's music school in Paris, which trained organists and choirmasters. Fortunately, the excellent grounding it gave to Fauré in renaissance church music was extended to include Schumann, Liszt and Wagner when, on Niedermeyer's death in 1861, Saint-Saëns took over the piano and composition classes. But Fauré remained attached to the modal harmonies of early music throughout his life, much of which was spent as an organist or choirmaster. His attempts to secure a post at the conservatoire were for a long time thwarted by conservatives who despised his ecclesiastical background and disliked his style of composition. However, he eventually secured a post there aged 52 and, surprisingly, 8 years later, the subversive Fauré became the conservatoire's director. He amply justified his enemies' fears by instituting (necessary) radical reforms, earning himself the sobriquet 'Robespierre' ! While at the conservatoire he taught Maurice Ravel, Georges Enescu and Nadia Boulanger. Deafness, elevation to the Légion d'Honneur and gentle hints prised him from the directorship into retirement in 1920 at the age of 75.

Two years later, Fauré started to compose the Piano Trio. Initially he had a clarinet taking the upper part, with violin as an alternative, but the idea of the clarinet had disappeared by the time it was published. Clarinetists have understandably resurrected the option. Both the themes (illustrated) of the compact and effective first movement are marked *cantando* – singing. The first is obviously in the movement's triple time while the second pretends that there are only two beats in the bar. Both themes are eloquently sung and extended with subtle play on their contrasting metres.

Allegro, ma non troppo



The gloriously long slow movement also shows Fauré's dedication to maintaining a melodic line. The cello plays mainly in its high register, close to the violin. The three instruments draw out seemingly endless themes as their legacy of swerving, dodgy notes from Fauré's early-music training sells us harmonic dummies.

The lively finale shows no sign of the ill health - 'perpetual fatigue' - that Fauré complained of when composing this piece. As the Fauré scholar Jean-Michel Nectoux writes, '*all the thematic and rhythmic elements are now in place and proceed to indulge in a joyful celebration, a perfect balance between ... fantasy and reason*'.