

Sergei Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Trio élégiaque No.1 in G minor (1892)

Rachmaninov was born into an aristocratic family, but his father's reckless improvidence had reduced them to just a single estate near Novgorod where Sergei started to learn the piano. When he was nine, this estate too had to be sold, and the family moved to St Petersburg where he studied piano and harmony at the conservatory. Shortly after the move, his sister Sofiya died of diphtheria, and his parents separated. This upheaval led to Rachmaninov failing his exams and aged 12 being sent to live with and to study under the authoritarian Nikolai Zverev of the Moscow Conservatory. The move was his making. Not only did he acquire strict work habits but at Zverev's Sunday afternoon gatherings he came into contact with composers such as Anton Rubinstein, Taneyev, Arensky and in particular Tchaikovsky.

Rachmaninov's desire to compose led in 1889, aged 16, to a break with Zverev who was only concerned to develop his considerable pianistic skills. Again, the break proved fruitful. His teaching was taken over by a talented cousin, Alexander Siloti, who had been taught by Liszt, and Rachmaninov moved in with the Satins, relatives of a fellow conservatory student. During the summer he stayed at Ivanovka, the Satin's country estate 500 km south-east of Moscow. He was to compose almost all his works there, inspired throughout his life by the rural tranquillity reminiscent of childhood days in Novgorod. His teacher Siloti resigned from the conservatory in 1891, and Rachmaninov, rather than taking a new teacher, decided to graduate a year early, which he did the following year, becoming only the third recipient of the Great Gold Medal in composition.

The first *Trio élégiaque* dates from the beginning of his graduation year and is a single movement lasting a little over 10 minutes. It starts *Lento lugubre* over tremulous strings and finishes with a funeral march, but in between becomes more animated and *appassionata*. Much of the movement is based on a simple, memorable, gloomily Russian theme with which the piece opens.

The trio may have been inspired by Tchaikovsky's own piano trio

mourning Nikolai Rubinstein; Rachmaninov wrote a second *Trio élégiaque* the following year in turn mourning the tragic death of Tchaikovsky himself.

