

Bedrich Smetana (1824-1884) *Piano Trio in G minor Op 15 (1855 rev 1857)*

Moderato assai

Allegro, ma non agitato; Alternativo I: Andante; Alternativo II: Maestoso

Finale: Presto; Meno presto, tranquillo presto; Grave, quasi marcia; Presto

Although Smetana's operas and orchestral tone poems have a nationalistic and political flavour (Bohemia was struggling to be free of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), his 1855 Piano Trio, like his two string quartets (1876 & 1882), is intensely personal. Here is Smetana's prefix to the trio: "In memory of my first-born child Bedriska (Frederica). Her exceptional musical gifts were enchanting, but her span of life was tragically cut short at the age of 4½ years." This dedication omits other recent tragedies. His second daughter Gabriela had already died aged 2 in 1854 and his wife Katerina was showing signs of the tuberculosis that was soon to kill her. The musically talented Bedriska had been particularly close to Smetana, and her death from scarlet fever devastated him. The anguish and anger of his personal grief pour out in the first movement in a way reminiscent of Mendelssohn's distraught final string quartet mourning his sister Fannie. It was a difficult time for the Smetanas on other fronts as well. The music school they had opened in Prague was a failure, and Hapsburg persecution of Czech political activists subsequently provoked Smetana and his wife to move to Gothenburg in Sweden where he directed a school of music. Smetana later recalled that "in December 1855, the Trio was publicly performed in Prague with poor success. The critics condemned it harshly, but later [1856] we performed it in our home for Liszt, who embraced me and expressed his congratulations to my wife." Liszt's view was supported by an enthusiastic reception of the Trio in Gothenburg in 1858.

The second movement has an unusual structure: the polka-like *Allegro ma non agitato* being interleaved with two more contemplative *Alternativo* sections. The main theme of the rondo last movement, with its competing duple and triple rhythms is derived from a protest song from the 1840s' rebellion. *Presto* slows to a *Grave* funeral march, followed by an impassioned song and a return to *Presto*, ending positively in the major.

Acknowledgements:

The use of material from these sources is gratefully acknowledged:

www.fuguemasters.com/smetana.html

www.kennedy-center.org

www.chambermusicociety.org

Chris Darwin