

# Program Notes: Dark Passions

Notes on the program by Patrick Castillo

## DMITRY SHOSTAKOVICH

(Born September 12/25, 1906, St. Petersburg; died August 9, 1975, Moscow)

### Piano Trio no. 1 in c minor, op. 8

**Composed:** 1923

**Published:** Unpublished during Shostakovich's lifetime. The posthumously published edition was assembled from multiple manuscript sources, with the final twenty-two measures of the piano part supplied by Boris Tishchenko (Shostakovich's student).

**Dedication:** Tatiana I. Glivenko

**First performance:** December 1923, St. Petersburg Conservatory; first public performance: March 20, 1925, Moscow Conservatory

**Other works from this period:** *Two Fables of Krilov* for Mezzo-Soprano and Orchestra, op. 4 (1922); Suite in f-sharp minor for Two Pianos, op. 6 (1922); Symphony no. 1 in f minor, op. 10 (1924–1925)

**Approximate duration:** 13 minutes

Any mention of “Shostakovich's Piano Trio,” as if he wrote only one, refers by default to the Trio in e minor, op. 67. It's a fair enough assumption. The e minor Trio, composed in 1944, encapsulates much of Shostakovich's artistic identity, synonymous as his name has become with the intensity of his musical response to his sociopolitical climate. The work is an elegy to the young Russian intellectual Ivan Sollertinsky, a confidant to the composer with whom he weathered the oppression of Stalin's regime. It is a powerful work and has rightly become one of Shostakovich's most highly regarded chamber pieces.

But the Opus 67 Piano Trio is actually Shostakovich's second piano trio—and as with other prominent composers' lesser-known juvenilia (cf. Gustav Mahler's Piano Quartet), examination of the First Piano Trio is both informative for the historian and satisfying for the listener.

Shostakovich composed the Trio in c minor (published as his Opus 8) while still a student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Like other products of his adolescence (Two Pieces for String Octet, completed two years later, offers another fine example), the trio shows the promise of a gifted young composer. But, more than that, it presages the hallmarks of his later maturity.

A passive listener might find the trio's constant shifts in tempo erratic and disorienting. However, the work's fragmented shape, essential to its overall character, is held together by its musical materials. The most important of these appears in the first measure. The cello presents a simple motif—three descending **half-steps** (G-flat–F–E)—which is echoed by the violin (C–B–A-sharp) to commence a long, sinewy melody of its own. Those three notes contain the trio's genetic code.

The piece abruptly picks up speed, and hints of the sardonic smirk that characterizes much of Shostakovich's later work appear. Just as abruptly, the earlier *Andante* music returns, now hypnotically centered on the opening three-note motif. In these slower sections, the trio exhibits the lyric sensibility that would later serve such elegiac works as Shostakovich's Eighth String Quartet.

At the following ***Allegro*** episode, the cello parlays the descending three-note motif into a clipped staccato melody. The tempo quickens, momentum builds—and then it suddenly brakes to ***Adagio*** once again. The cello transforms the *Allegro* staccato melody into a slow, **legato** utterance, marked ***piano, espressivo***; the piano punctuates the *Adagio* passage with soft, undulating chords.

This figure continues into the subsequent *Andante* section, as the cello introduces a new melodic idea. What follows is the trio's most beguiling music—yet the attentive listener will observe recurrences of the

three-note motif, like Waldo mischievously hiding behind the set of a love scene. The legato version of the previous melody returns, now in the violin and somehow suggesting a wry smile. The ear suspects a sly duplicity, as though the cello's earlier heartfelt utterance were not wholly ingenuous.

From here, the trio builds steadily—***Moderato***, then *Allegro*, and finally *Prestissimo fantastico*—with the three-note motif continuing to permeate the music's constantly evolving textures. Shostakovich indulges in a brief remembrance of the opening *Andante* before arriving at the trio's radiant climax. But by this time, the ear is dizzy from Shostakovich's wiles. The soaring strings and triumphantly clanging piano chords—signals, one would think, of jubilation—should, perhaps, be met warily.

Such subterfuge would later become an existentially vital part of Shostakovich's craft. In 1937, following official criticism of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, Shostakovich designed his Fifth Symphony to outwardly gratify the Communist Party while furtively expressing his political angst. The Piano Trio in c minor, composed in Shostakovich's eighteenth year, contains early signs of the technique and artistic fortitude on which his greatness would be founded.

## ERNŐ DOHNÁNYI

(Born July 27, 1877, Pozsony [now Bratislava]; died February 9, 1960, New York City)

### Piano Quintet no. 2 in e-flat minor, op. 26

**Composed:** 1914

**Published:** 1921, Simrock

**First performance:** November 12, 1914, Berlin, by the Klingler Quartet and the composer

**Other works from this period:** *Tante Simona*, op. 20 (opera) (1911–1912); *Variations on a Nursery Song* for Piano and Orchestra, op. 25 (1914); Violin Concerto no. 1 in d minor, op. 27 (1914–1915); Six Concert Études for Piano, op. 28 (1916)

**Approximate duration:** 25 minutes

Excepting perhaps Franz Liszt, Ernő Dohnányi must be regarded as the most versatile musician to come from Hungary. He was, in addition to a great composer, one of history's finest pianists; he achieved particular notoriety for performing Beethoven's complete piano music in one season and undertaking all twenty-seven of Mozart's piano concerti in another. Dohnányi was moreover a supremely gifted conductor and an influential teacher and administrator, as well, playing a crucial role in building Hungary's musical culture in the first half of the twentieth century.

Dohnányi received his formal musical training at the Budapest Academy of Music, where he would later briefly serve as Director. At the time of his enrollment, he was the first Hungarian musician of his level to choose to study at the Budapest Academy; his childhood friend Béla Bartók followed suit, beginning a lifelong trope of Dohnányi leading the way forward for Hungarian musical culture by his example. Some years later, starting in 1915, Dohnányi took it upon himself to raise Hungary's collective musical sophistication: he independently presented hundreds of concerts, selecting programs that aspired to a higher artistic standard than Hungarian audiences were accustomed to—and, between 1919 and 1921, when guest artists were unavailable, Dohnányi himself performed some 120 concerts a year in Budapest alone. Bartók credited Dohnányi with providing his country's entire musical life during these years.

But unlike Bartók and Kodály, Dohnányi didn't mine Hungarian folk music for his compositional vocabulary—which has likely complicated his place in history somewhat, in that he was the chief architect of Hungary's musical landscape but has inevitably been overshadowed in this

\*Bolted terms are defined in the glossary, which begins on page 90.

respect by those composers who more literally gave Hungary its musical voice. Dohnányi's music instead celebrates the Romantic legacy of Johannes Brahms and Robert Schumann; his Piano Quintet in c minor, op. 1, which introduced Dohnányi to an international audience, can be heard as a descendant of the quintets of Schumann, Brahms, and Dvořák—the genre's definitive works.

Dohnányi's Second Piano Quintet, in e-flat minor, followed the first by two decades. By the time of its completion in 1914, Dohnányi had achieved global renown as the heir apparent to Liszt as Hungary's preeminent musical figure. And indeed, the e-flat minor Quintet is the work of a composer at the height of his creative powers. Its innovative features furthermore reveal Dohnányi's compositional skill in advancing the language of his predecessors into new territory.

The quintet's opening *Allegro non troppo* begins with an ominous theme, stated in **octaves, sotto voce**, by the first violin and cello over rumbling pianissimo **triplets** in the piano, like distant storm clouds. To this long and winding opening statement, the second violin and viola offer a terse response. Urgent triplets in the second violin clear the way for a chordal gesture in the piano, which turns quickly from an earnest sigh to an understated hurrah. The music becomes harmonically restive—a characteristic of the quintet that Dohnányi continues to probe over its three movements—before subsiding into quiet **tremolando** in the viola. As the piano issues a lyrical statement of the opening theme, the strings expand to a pseudo-orchestral texture.

The first violin introduces the **dolce** second theme, marked by a descending leap of a seventh and followed by a crooning chromatic ascent. But this music retains some of the nervous energy that preceded it, with continuing oscillations in the piano accompaniment and further harmonic restlessness. Dohnányi forgoes a repeat of the **exposition**; the piano's chordal gesture abruptly returns, launching the movement into its inclement **development** section. Overlapping string lines and clanging piano chords conjure waves crashing ashore. The movement's volatility is epitomized by its most glorious moment: as the storm seems to approach its fiercest roar, the music enters without warning into a **leggiero** passage. String pizzicati and nimble piano figurations surround the viola's restatement of the opening theme, now reimagined as a broad, generous major-key musical statement. Dohnányi has masterfully exploited the same thematic idea to encompass dark passions and rapturous ecstasy. In its final breaths, the movement returns the theme to e-flat minor, but now at the luxurious pace of the viola's major-key version; the final **cadence**, curiously, is in E-flat major.

The second movement **Intermezzo** resembles a waltz in its melodic elegance and triple-meter gait, but with a suggestion of something vaguely sinister afoot. The theme, set in the dark hue of the viola, is introduced with three enigmatic repeated notes. The tempo (*Allegretto*) is a bit rushed and agitated for a waltz. And, as in the first movement, the music is harmonically unsettled. Soon, this music is transformed into a psychedelic **Presto**—far from the beautiful *Blue Danube*, this is a fevered dream of a waltz. The following section, marked **Rubato e capriccioso**, takes the theme on an even more bizarre turn. Further **variations** ensue, ending with one in cut time, divorcing the theme even from its characteristic triple meter. Any illusion of a waltz is now completely dissolved, revealing this brief movement to be a thing of surprising gravity. Echoing the mystery of the first movement's final measure, the *Intermezzo* ends with an abrupt shift to a-flat minor.

The quintet's *Moderato* finale begins with a **fugue**, its melancholy **subject** introduced by the cello, *espressivo ma sotto voce*, followed in turn by the viola, second violin, and first violin. The fugue's quiet introspection escalates, briefly, to full-voiced anguish before the piano enters with a hymn-like **chorale**. Soon, the strings enter the sublime realm of the piano chorale with material derived from the fugue, now transfigured into a seraphic vision.

The rapture is fleeting. The piano reintroduces the ominous first movement theme, which propels the ensuing *Animato* section. This remembrance of previous turmoil augurs crisis in paradise. As the move-

ment continues, Dohnányi unites this theme with the finale's opening fugue subject, fashioning them into an overpowering statement. It seems as though the promise of paradise has been lost, subsumed into the pandemonium of what came before. But light triumphs over dark, as this newly unified musical idea ultimately emerges as an utterance of resplendent beauty. The quintet finally ends, unequivocally, in E-flat major.

In its facility with melodic and harmonic materials, its imaginative formal design, and its sure-handed treatment of ensemble textures, the Piano Quintet no. 2 reflects Dohnányi's exceptional craftsmanship. The work moreover demonstrates his supreme compositional technique in service of a compelling artistic point of view. It shows Dohnányi to be a composer of deep human empathy. It is a work too often overshadowed by the piano quintets of higher-profile composers and even by Dohnányi's own Opus 1—a neglect that such stirring music demands be rectified.

## GUSTAV MAHLER

(Born July 7, 1860, Kalischt, near Iglau, Bohemia; died May 18, 1911, Vienna)

### Piano Quartet in a minor

**Composed:** ca. 1876–1878

**Published:** 1973, Hamburg

**First performance:** ca. 1876–1878; January 12, 1964, New York

**Other works from this period:** *Das klagende Lied* (cantata for soloists, chorus, and orchestra) (1878–1880, rev. 1892–1893, 1898–1899); *Im Lenz* for Voice and Piano (1880)

**Approximate duration:** 12 minutes

One of the mightiest musical voices of the late Romantic period is that of the Austrian composer and conductor Gustav Mahler. Mahler's epic cycle of nine symphonies, plus a tenth left unfinished at his death, stand among the most powerful and intensely personal statements in the Western canon. In addition to his symphonies, Mahler left a significant catalogue of vocal pieces, many with orchestra, which likewise rank among the definitive works of the turn of the twentieth century. With each of his colossal symphonies and song cycles, Mahler created a vast musical world into which he poured heartrending expressions of profound joy and sorrow, love and fear, wonder and anxiety at the world around him, and deep reflections on the human condition, in turns fatalistic and sublime.

Only one chamber work survives from Mahler's pen—likely one of several he composed while a student at the Vienna Conservatory before going on to stake his claim in the pantheon of great symphonic composers. In the late 1870s, while still a teenager, he composed a movement for a Piano Quartet in a minor—projected as the first movement of a multimovement work, which he abandoned twenty-four measures into the second movement, a g-minor scherzo. The quartet was not published or performed until nearly a century later.

The quartet is a **sonata-form** movement built on three contrasting themes. The first is stated by the piano amidst ominous introductory chords and then taken up in short order by the strings. The more turbulent second theme (marked *Entschlossen*—"resolute") is not, as per sonata-form convention, set in a contrasting key but rather is also in a minor. Despite remaining in the home key, Mahler distinguishes the new theme with chromatic melodic descents. A third musical idea closes the exposition: as if to counteract the gravity of a minor, this theme **modulates** restlessly. Each of these materials is skillfully woven together in the impassioned development section.

The movement's most immediately striking feature is the brief but searing violin **cadenza** that appears near the work's conclusion. Mahler instructs the violinist to play *ungemein rubato und leidenschaftlich*—"uncommonly rubato (i.e., with rhythmic flexibility) and passionate." In the wake of all that preceded it, this cadenza seems to distill the entire work's emotional intensity into one vehement cry.

Given its place in Mahler's oeuvre, this single-movement piano quartet is routinely dismissed as a student work—an assessment that warrants closer examination. The expressive precision of its thematic materials and such moments as the violin cadenza reveal the work to be more than a merely competent student exercise. The work offers an informative lens into the gravitas and ferocity latent in the adolescent Mahler, soon to be unleashed in one of the twentieth century's most significant bodies of work.

## ANTON ARENSKY

(Born June 30/July 12, 1861, Novgorod; died February 12/25, 1906, near Terioki, Finland [now Zelenogorsk, Russia])

### Piano Trio no. 1 in d minor, op. 32

**Composed:** 1894

**Dedication:** To the memory of Karl Davidov

**Other works from this period:** *Six Children's Pieces* for Piano, op. 34 (1892); *String Quartet no. 2 in a minor*, op. 35 (1894); *Twenty-Four Characteristic Pieces* for Piano, op. 36 (1894)

**Approximate duration:** 25 minutes

If he tends to be overshadowed by such towering figures as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov, the composer, conductor, and pianist Anton Arensky must nevertheless be regarded in his own right as a seminal figure in Russian music history. He was a musician of unassailable skill, graduating from the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1882 with a gold medal and, more significantly, the confidence and endorsement of his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov. Following the completion of his studies, Arensky was immediately appointed professor of **harmony** and **counterpoint** at the Moscow Conservatory, where his students included Rachmaninov, Scriabin, and Reinhold Glière; his relocation to Moscow moreover brought him into the social and professional circles of Tchaikovsky and Sergei Taneyev.

"Arensky was one of the most eclectic Russian composers of his generation," writes musicologist David Brown. His output reflects a broad range of influences, both classically Western and traditionally Russian. His Piano Concerto betrays a fascination with Chopin; the Piano Trio no. 1 in d minor, op. 32, audibly nods to the d minor Trio of Felix Mendelssohn. Elsewhere in his catalogue, as in the Cello Quartet, elements of Russian folk song and liturgical music emerge.

The unifying element of Arensky's language is his instinct for melody; his ear for evocative keyboard textures is also a prevailing hallmark of much of his work. Given these qualities, Arensky primarily excelled in the composition of songs and piano miniatures. These attributes likewise color the Opus 32 Trio, Arensky's most finely wrought, and best-known, large-scale composition.

Above a burbling piano accompaniment, the violin presents the *Allergo moderato's* brooding first theme—a long, emotive statement whose arching melodic contour simultaneously bespeaks passion and pathos. After a sudden impassioned outburst, the piano assumes the theme. An upbeat, elegant music takes over but just as quickly becomes tumultuous as the cello and violin in turn introduce the broad, sweeping second theme. The exposition closes with an adrenalized charge.

In the movement's development section, Arensky assembles a mosaic of fragments of thematic material from the exposition. The ensemble dynamic, here as throughout the movement, sets the violin and cello together as a counterbalance to the piano's gravitational pull. All three voices truly come together only as the development section hurtles inexorably towards the **recapitulation**, a rapturous denouement, before the *Adagio* **coda** transfigures the movement's primary theme into a wistful expression of melancholia.

The specter of Mendelssohn, peripherally audible in the first movement, becomes more so in the trio's scherzo. This music's blithe puckishness might recall that composer's signature *Midsummer Night's Dream*-style scherzi, but it seems somehow more manic. Nor, as the movement pro-

gresses, does it remain as light on its feet as the scherzo of Mendelssohn's d minor Trio: Arensky's is somehow brawnier, like an offensive lineman dancing a waltz but with surprising gracefulness. This is especially true of the movement's **trio** section (which further distinguishes the work from Mendelssohn's, whose d minor Trio's scherzo movement lacks a trio section altogether).

Arensky composed the Piano Trio in memoriam the Russian cellist Karl Davidov, who had died in 1889. Accordingly, the trio's third movement, designated *Elegia*, begins with a mournful cello solo, played **con sordino**. This soon becomes a duet with the violin (also muted), underpinned by the slightest suggestion of a funeral march in the piano accompaniment. The movement's faster middle section departs the gloom of g minor for brighter G major; the music remains pianissimo, like a hazy recollection of sunnier bygone days.

The work concludes with a vigorous *Allegro non troppo* finale. The main *Allegro* section is offset partway through by a gentle *Andante*; Arensky revisits the music of the *Elegia* and first movements, as if to honor Davidov a final time before bringing his **tombeau** to its powerful conclusion.