

## **Trio No. 1 in g minor, "Trio Elegiaque"**

**Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873 - 1943)**

Sergei Rachmaninoff was a young man of 19 when he wrote this piano trio for his final exam at the Moscow Conservatory. Within a few days of its completion, he performed it with fellow students before the school's examinations board, headed by Tchaikovsky. This was the only performance of the work during his lifetime, and it wasn't published until 1947.

Rachmaninoff titled the work an elegy though no dedication is indicated, nor does it seem to have been inspired by a particular event. Sergei was certainly familiar with feelings of melancholy, however. Growing up in late Imperial Russia, his childhood was filled with loss. His mother, having come from an aristocratic land-owning family, brought five estates to her marriage. Each was lost through his father's gambling. Subsequently the family moved to a cramped apartment in St. Petersburg where his sister died, his parents separated, and Sergei failed all of his exams at the St Petersburg Conservatory. Concerned, his mother sent him at age 12 to study with Sergei Taneyev, a piano teacher at the Moscow Conservatory famous for his harsh discipline. Under Taneyev's strict governance he began serious study in piano and composition, and through a growing connection with Tchaikovsky, he found a mentor and father figure.

The influence of Tchaikovsky is quite evident in this piece. The opening four note rising motif introduced by the piano directly references the four note descending horn motif of Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto. At the time, this would have been seen as a nod of respect to his mentor. The trio is written in one expansive movement beginning with an ethereal murmuring in the strings from which the piano enters with the rich, somber theme. After the violin introduces the second theme, the music develops through various tempos and keys, sustaining a mood of intense passion, yearning melancholy and classic Russian spirit. Finally spent, the music ends with a funeral march.

## **Two Nguni Dances**

**Bongani Ndodana-Breen (b. 1975)**

Inyanga & Intsomi

Ndodana-Breen is of the Xhosa clan, born in Queenstown in the Eastern Cape of South Africa during the Apartheid era. The Nguni people are ancestors of the Xhosa clan. When the Nguni migrated from East Africa in the 11th Century they broke up into two groups. Those who remained north of South Africa became the Zulu and those who settled in the south became the Xhosa.

Ndodana-Breen attended primary and secondary school at the local St Andrews College, a white English colonial school based on the British schooling system, founded during the Oxford Movement. As a minority black African at a school with majority white attendance he

experienced institutionalized racism as a part of everyday life. The musical education he received within this context was almost exclusively in the western European tradition. From compositions he wrote for the school's boys choir and chamber ensembles, his promise as a musician was recognized. He received a bursary to study music at Rhodes University, then another to study composition at Stellenbosch University.

At 24, Ndodana-Breen emigrated to Canada to found and become music director of Ensemble Noir. Over the next decade he gained prominent international recognition as a composer and has since written a wide range of compositions that are performed worldwide.

Describing his engagement with African music in terms of a gradual distancing from western compositional standards, the composer writes: "As part of my quest for an identity as an African, I have been drawn more and more towards an 'African aesthetic' within my art form, which is riddled with European conventions. In trying to make sense of a cultural paradox, a new musical language emerges." Currently a fellow at Yale University's Institute of Sacred Music, he is creating a major new work, 'African Passion', "based largely on gospel texts, drawing from many African languages and the diaspora and evoking a pan-African sonic perspective."

Inyanga is based on the umxhentso, a traditional dance style of the Xhosa people used in cleansing rituals to establish connections and to seek guidance and vision from their ancestors. Dancers pound the earth with alternating feet in heavy, deliberate downward motions, usually accompanied by a multi-voice ostinato with an anticipated first beat. Ndodana-Breen explains, "The dance is depicted in this piece by declamatory passages when all three instruments are not in counterpoint and all is the rhythmic pedal point of the piano over a G alternating between both hands. There are moments when a motif of just two notes is introduced, conjuring up the uhadi, a traditional instrument based on the hunting bow of hunter-gatherers. This piece, like most African music, is cyclical in form, always going back to the umxhentso theme."

Intsomi is based on traditional African children's stories that are to be recited only at night by the home fire, usually by grandparents to their grandchildren. These tales set in the African bushveld describe a fantastic world of magic trees, talking lions, evil baboons, cunning hyena and wild patient elephants. Ndodana-Breen's music invites listeners to envision scenarios based on these characters.

## **Nostos**

Udi Perlman (b. 1990)

Udi Perlman is an Israeli born composer. Originally from Tel Aviv, he is currently a doctoral candidate in composition at Yale University and holds degrees from the Barenboim-Said Akademie in Berlin and the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. He divides his time between homes in Berlin and New Haven, Connecticut. The recipient of innumerable awards,

prizes and commissions, his orchestral, chamber and vocal works have been performed by ensembles in Europe, the United States and Israel. His compositions combine the musical traditions he absorbed growing up in Israel with avant-garde sensibilities and a deep love of western classical music. Described as a “demonstration of ingenuity and great drive,” his works have been hailed for their “fascinating texture” and “elegant structure.” Nostos was commissioned by The Lysander Trio who premiered the trio in 2022.

## **Piano Trio in B flat Major, Opus 97, “Archduke”** Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 - 1827)

Allegro moderato

Scherzo. Allegro

Andante cantabile, ma pero con moto

Allegro moderato

The Archduke is one of the most beloved piano trios in the chamber music repertoire. It is Beethoven’s last and finest piano trio, completed in 1811 at the height of his maturity and the end of his middle or “heroic” period. Often praised for its “nobility and grandeur,” it is a work distinguished by spaciousness, serenity and lyric breath. Beethoven was in good spirits when he wrote this piece, having emerged from a difficult period the previous year when Vienna was invaded by Napoleon’s forces.

Beethoven dedicated the trio to his longtime friend, patron and only composition student, Archduke Rudolph, youngest son of the Emperor of Austria, Leopold II. Beethoven remained Rudolph’s teacher until 1824, dedicating 14 works to him, some of the most significant being the 4th and 5th Piano Concertos, the Hammerklavier and Op. 111 Piano Sonatas and the Missa Solemnis. For long stretches of time the composer depended on Rudolph’s patronage for financial stability. In 1809, when Beethoven accepted a court appointment as Kapellmeister from Napoleon's brother who had been made King of Westphalia, Rudolph granted him an annual annuity to keep him in Vienna.

The trio has four expansive contrasting movements. The first opens peacefully, with a stately and graceful theme on the piano, setting a tone of confidence for the whole piece. It unfolds easily, with a rich and balanced texture between the voices. Delightful pizzicato passages in the violin and flights of delicate piano trills ornament the close of the development. The Scherzo is cheerful, though the central trio casts a darker mood in a winding chromatic fugue, then escapes to end brightly. The serene slow movement which foreshadows Beethoven’s later works is a set of graceful variations on a chorale-like theme. While carefully maintaining the harmonic structure, a flowing accompaniment increases in complexity with each successive variation, then settles back to the quiet theme. Without pause, the final movement

takes off in a jaunty rondo with a Hungarian-sounding theme, increasing in momentum toward a joyous end.