

### Anton Arensky: *Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 32 (1894)*

Anton Arensky (1861-1906) is a name often overlooked by the Western canon, overshadowed among the ranks of late Romantic Russian composers by his immediate predecessors (Rimsky-Korsakov), contemporaries (Tchaikovsky), and successors (Rachmaninoff and Skryabin). Indeed, Arensky's legacy can accurately be described as medial; he is better recognized for the impact of his pedagogy on his students than for his own compositions. In an unfortunately prescient reproach of Arensky's close association with Tchaikovsky, his teacher at the Conservatory – Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov – predicted that his name would soon drift into obscurity. Today, only Arensky's chamber music as well as his opera, *Dream on the Volga*, are his most programmed works, and his *Piano Trio in D Minor, Op. 32* helms this list.

Despite Arensky's position at the peripheries of the celebrated Russian school of composers from the Moscow Conservatory, his *Piano Trio* is anything but derivative. Composed in 1894, this four-movement work was dedicated as an elegy to the former principal cellist of the St. Petersburg Opera, Karl Davydov (1838 – 1889), founder of the Russian school of cello technique (which stressed the connections between the body of the performer and the instrument) and proclaimed "*Tsar of Cellists*" by Tchaikovsky.

The first movement, *Allegro Moderato*, opens with an ostinato rhythm in the piano, setting sail on undulating waves. The violin enters with a lilting melody, to which the cello responds with equal verve. The three develop their conversation on equal terms, punctuated by moments of dramatic homophony.



*The St. Petersburg Opera House (Now the Mariinsky Theater)*



*Karl Davydov with his cello*

The next movement is a typical *Scherzo*. Listen for the whimsical bird calls in the strings and the scalar runs in the piano, setting a scene that would be quite at home in a classic cartoon. The *Trio* dips into the minor modality before jumping back to the cheery primary theme.

The third movement, entitled, *Elegia*, is a stirring homage to Davydov, beginning with a rhapsodic cello solo accompanied by sparse chords in the piano. The violin takes up this melody, letting it soar up into a higher register. The cello then returns to sing in duet with the violin. When it is the piano's turn, the violins take up the piano's ostinato from the opening movement, letting the funeral barge sail forth.

The finale is a virtuosic showcase for all three instruments, a final salute to Davydov's stellar career.

## Felix Mendelssohn: *Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 48 (1839)*

“[It is] the master trio of today... a lovely composition which years from hence will still delight grand- and great-grandchildren.” -Robert Schumann, in reference to Mendelssohn’s *D Minor Piano Trio*.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809-1847) was a prolific composer and former child prodigy working at the cusp of the Classical and Romantic eras. His sister, Fanny Mendelssohn, was an equally gifted pianist and composer who even published some of her own works under his name due to societal conventions and restrictions of 19<sup>th</sup> century Germany. Felix Mendelssohn is probably best known for his incidental music and overture to the Shakespearian play, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and his chamber music (the *Octet for Strings*, to name just one of these colossal works). His *Piano Trio in D Minor* was composed in discussion with the pianist Ferdinand Hiller, who urged Mendelssohn to allow the pianist to shine through with technical brilliance throughout the work. Mendelssohn revised his original sketches to heed Hiller’s advice, and received high praise from Robert Schumann, “[Mendelssohn is] the Mozart of the nineteenth century, the brightest musician, who most clearly understands the contradictions of the age and is the first to reconcile them.”

The four movements of the work follow an almost symphonic structure, with the opening *Molto allegro ed agitato* followed by a dreamy slow movement, a playful scherzo, and a romping finale. The first movement establishes the pianist’s virtuosity that will be showcased throughout. Here, the strings sing arching melodies that envelop the nimble piano. The second movement, *Andante con moto tranquillo* is inevitably compared to Mendelssohn’s *Song Without Words*, as the piano deftly accompanies its own melody in the right hand with lustrous arpeggiations in the left hand. The scherzo, *Leggiero e vivace* clearly evokes the scherzo of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, notorious among string players as an orchestral excerpt of great difficulty, requiring the utmost delicacy and finesse. The finale, *Allegro assai appassionato*, is decidedly Schubertian, with the piano’s dazzling pyrotechnics joined in equal fervor by the strings with an exciting back-and-forth between all three performers. Mendelssohn, unable to end the piece on a melancholic note, returns to the major modality in a triumphant coda, presaging a glimmer of hope for the future.



*Felix Mendelssohn, by Eduard Magnus, 1846*

In stark contrast to Arensky’s naysayers, contemporaries of Felix Mendelssohn hailed his first piano trio as a *masterpiece*, able to withstand the test of time by virtue of its *loveliness*. Whereas Arensky is faulted for being derivative, a mere product of his influences, Mendelssohn’s work (admittedly a continuation and elaboration of the Classical style and the work of the first Viennese School) is singularly lauded for its beauty. Given that Mendelssohn wrote his trio five and a half decades before Arensky, the changing attitudes of their contemporaries towards the exigencies of composition reflect a more widespread dissatisfaction with Common Practice theory that accompanied the turn of the century; it was only twenty years after Arensky’s trio that Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* was premiered in Paris.

-Saagar Asnani