

## Smetana Trio

Saturday, February 27, 2021  
2:00 PM  
Bethel United Methodist Church Hall,  
Lewes, DE

### PROGRAM

*Trio Élégiacque No. 1 in G Minor*

Sergei Rachmaninoff  
(1873 – 1943)

*Piano Trio No. 3 in C Major, H. 332*  
*Allegro moderato*  
*Andante*  
*Allegro*

Bohuslav Martinů  
(1890 -1959)

### INTERMISSION

*Piano Trio in G Minor, Op 15*  
*Moderato assai*  
*Allegro, ma non agitato*  
*Finale, Presto*

Bedřich Smetana  
(1824-1884)

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## Program Notes

### **RACHMANINOFF**

#### *Trio Élégiacque No. 1 in G Minor (1892)*

Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff was born into a musical family. He took up piano at the age of four and graduated from the Moscow Conservatory in 1892, having already composed several piano and orchestral works.

Over the course of the next twenty years, in addition to composing, Rachmaninoff conducted at the Bolshoi Theatre, relocated to for a time to Dresden, Germany, and toured the United States. Following the Russian Revolution, he and his family left Russia, via Scandinavia, and settled in the United States, where his main sources of income were piano performances and conducting. One month before his death Rachmaninoff was granted American citizenship.

The *Trio Élégiacque No. 1* was written in Moscow, when the composer was almost 19 years old. It was first performed publicly shortly thereafter, with the composer at the piano. However it was 1947 before the first published edition appeared; the trio has no designated opus number.

The work is cast in only one movement, in contrast to most piano trios, which have three or four. This movement is in the classical sonata form, but the exposition is built on twelve episodes that are symmetrically represented in the recapitulation. The elegiac theme is presented in the first part *Lento lugubre* by the piano. In the following parts, the elegy is presented by the cello and violin, while the spirit is constantly evolving through a succession of tempos, until the theme is ultimately recast as a funeral march.

The suggestion often heard - that this trio is an early elegy for Tchaikovsky - is doubtful. In 1892 the elder composer was in good health, and there was no premonition of the sudden illness that would kill him nearly two years later. Rather, the key to the connection with Tchaikovsky is the piece's opening theme, a four-note rising motif. Played backwards it echoes that of Tchaikovsky's first piano concerto (completed in 1875). The allusion would have been apparent to listeners and teachers at the university, as would the closing funeral march imitative of Tchaikovsky's elegy to Nikolai Rubinstein. Rachmaninoff may well have intended this work as an homage to his friend and mentor. Two years later, however, when Tchaikovsky passed away at the age of 52 following a sudden illness, Rachmaninoff wrote a second elegiac trio, this time a work of true lament.

## MARTINŮ

*Piano Trio No. 3 in C Major, H. 332 (1951)*

Czech composer Bohuslav Jan Martinů was born to a non-musical family in a small town in Bohemia. In school he was known to be very shy, and did not participate in plays or pageants with his classmates. But as a violinist, he excelled and developed a favorable reputation, giving his first public concert in his hometown at the age of 15. The townspeople raised enough money to fund his schooling, and in 1906 he left to begin studies at the Prague Conservatory.

Whilst there he fared poorly as a student, showing little interest in the rigid pedagogy and hours of violin practice required. He was far more interested in exploring Prague and learning on his own, reading books on many subjects and attending concerts. Martinů became engrossed in analyzing new music, particularly French impressionist works. He could memorize much of what he heard, to the extent that when back in his room, he could write out large parts of a score almost perfectly. Dropped from the violin program, Martinů was moved to the department that taught composition, but was finally dismissed in 1910 for "incurable negligence".

Martinů left for Paris in 1923, having received a small scholarship from the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education. During his first years there, he incorporated in his music many of the trends of the time, including jazz, neoclassicism, and surrealism. He was particularly attracted to Stravinsky, whose novel, angular, propulsive rhythms and sonorities reflected the industrial revolution, sports events and motorized transportation. He became prolific, quickly composing chamber, orchestral, choral and instrumental works. He often incorporated Central European ethnic music into his works and continued using Bohemian and Moravian folk melodies throughout his life.

His symphonic career began when he emigrated to the United States in 1941, fleeing the German invasion of France. His six symphonies were performed by all the major US orchestras. Eventually Martinů returned to live in Europe for two years starting in 1953, then was back in New York until returning to Europe for good in 1956. He died in Switzerland in 1959.

Martinů was a prolific composer who wrote almost 400 works overall, many of which are regularly performed or recorded. Musicians and critics have expressed amazement at how extraordinary Martinů's mind was in developing a whole orchestral score while taking a walk. He wrote 15 trios for various combinations of instruments, yet only four of them for the classical configuration of piano, violin and cello. The first two date from his time in France in the 1930s; neither of them was referred to by the composer as a "piano trio". The remaining two pieces, including this *Piano Trio in C Major*, were written in the United States (where Martinů was, among other things, a teacher of Burt Bacharach). These two later trios are both more lyrical and more serious than those from Paris, featuring particular playfulness and poeticism.

*Piano Trio No. 3* is an extensive piece, a glorious distillation of all that's good about Martinu's mature music, and the most forcible of his piano trios. After listening to just the first few bars, one is totally captured. The singing theme which swells into life just a minute or so into the slow movement is remarkably lush; it is often hard to believe that only three musicians are playing. Joy, conflict and tears are there together with an overhung hesitancy. The central *andante* hints at the nostalgia of a possible return from the USA to his Czech homeland. This never happened, but at the time it seemed feasible to the composer. There is a similar passage in the central section of the *finale*, before the driving *toccata* returns. The coda is soulful, nostalgic and rhythmically exhilarating with a splendid bustle and onrush returning at the conclusion.

The radiance of Martinu's output is among its most endearing features. It is striking that a composer so close to some of 20th century history's darker moments was able to express himself with such humanity and warmth.

[Catalog numbers with the prefix "H" are based on the comprehensive catalog of Martinu's works prepared by the Belgian musicologist Harry Halbreich].

## **BEDŘICH SMETANA**

*Piano Trio in G Minor, Op 15 (1855)*

Bedřich (Friedrich) Smetana's first music teacher was his father, František, a master brewer and enthusiastic amateur violinist. Bedřich subsequently studied harmony and piano under a professional tutor and performed in public at the age of six. For some time he had to support himself as music teacher to the family of Leopold, Count von Thun and by playing dance music in the homes of wealthy families — but this work did have its advantages; he developed a great love of dancing and met the pianist Kateřina Kolářová, the woman who was to become his first wife. Encouraged by Franz Liszt, Smetana opened a piano school in Prague in 1848 and the next year married Kateřina.

The Smetanas endured much loss in their lives. In the first six years of their marriage, they had four daughters, three of whom died. Their music school was a failure, and life in their homeland was made increasingly difficult as a result of the composer's political activities and associations. The aborted Czech revolution caused the Hapsburg Empire to crack down and make life uncomfortable for Czech patriots, ultimately causing Smetana and his wife to move to Sweden, where he had been appointed conductor of the Philharmonic Society of Gothenburg. In 1861 he returned to Prague and led in the establishment of the national opera house.

Smetana's most popular works, particularly outside his native land, are the opera *Prodaná nevěsta* (*The Bartered Bride*) and the Bohemian nationalist cycle of orchestral tone poems *Má Vlast* (*My Fatherland*), the most famous being *Vltava* (*The Moldau*). His chamber music compositions, though few in number, all held very personal significance for him.

The *Piano Trio in G Minor* evokes a poignant and tragic time in the composer's life and the specter of death unifies all three movements. It was "written in memory of my first child, Bedřiška (Fritzi), who enchanted us with her extraordinary musical talent, and yet was snatched away from us by death, aged 4 1/2 years." Smetana composed the work in 2 months and "in the winter . . . performed [it] in public in Prague with myself at the piano."

In the *Trio's* dramatic first movement, Smetana assigns each of the three instruments a role. Opening with impassioned fervor, the violin declaims his emotional anguish. Warm and tender recollections of Bedřiška inspire the second theme, sung quietly by the cello, and just before the recapitulation, while her spirit seems to hover in *pianissimo*, Smetana himself answers in a passage for solo piano.

The second movement paints a musical portrait of Bedřiška that is darkened by sadness and the spirit of death. Smetana combines into this single movement what would traditionally be two. The main body is a *scherzo*-like remembrance of family polkas, while two *Alternativo* sections function as a slow movement. *Alternativo I* clearly recalls fond memories, but *Alternivo II* is a bleak funeral march.

The final movement's principle theme is derived from the tune *Sil jsem proso na souvrati* (I was sowing millet), a protest song associated with the Rebellion of the 1840's. (Smetana also used this theme in his *Characteristic Variations on a Czech Folksong* for violin and piano, and in the finale of his *Piano Sonata G Minor*). This *Presto* movement eventually slows down to a funeral march marked *Grave, quasi-marcia*, followed by an impassioned song, and finally a return to the *Presto*, ending the work in G Major. Thus the trio concludes triumphantly victorious over death.