

TCHAIKOVSKY

Piano Trio in A minor opus 50

- I. Pezzo elegiaco
- II. Thema con variazioni
 - A. Variazioni I-XI
 - B. Variazione finale e Coda

In the summer of 1881 Nadezhda von Meck, Tchaikovsky's patron, wrote to ask him if he had ever considered writing a piano trio. He replied that he found the combination of piano and stringed instruments unbearable: "It seems to me that these timbres do not blend with each other, and I assure you that it is a torture for me to listen to a trio or a sonata for these instruments." Yet just a few months later he had begun the monumental opus 50, perhaps spurred to creative activity in a relatively unproductive phase in his career by the death of his close friend and colleague Nikolai Rubinstein. The trio is dedicated to Rubinstein with the heading *Dem Andenken eines grossen Kunstlers* (to the memory of a great artist). But his problems with the medium of the piano trio had not disappeared. When composition was under way he wrote again to Mme. von Meck: "I fear that I have written music of a symphonic character arranged for piano trio...." The combination of these difficulties and the sheer emotional intensity of the music led to a piece of great length - over 50 minutes - which seems sometimes to strain against the limits of the medium. The piano writing is sometimes heavy enough to be reminiscent of the concertos, and some of the violin and cello parts seem designed for a whole string section rather than individual instruments. The form of the piece is also unusual. The first movement is an extended sonata form without a development section, with three principal thematic groups. The first five variations of the second movement simply vary the character and mode of the folk-like theme - thereafter the forms become more extended. Variation VI is a long waltz movement led by the cello, variations VII and VIII a chorale and fugue respectively, and variation IX an elegiac lament for muted strings. Number X is a mazurka mostly for solo piano, while

variation XI returns to a simple statement of the theme which gradually fragments and dies away to bring this part of the piece to a close.

The final variation is in fact a complete sonata movement in itself, in which Tchaikovsky splits the variation theme into two parts to provide the first and second subject material. This exuberant music seems to be leading to an affirmative conclusion, but at the climax of the final section the minor mode returns and the tragic coda begins. This is a colossal reprise of the first movement's principal theme, played *fff* at the top register of the strings, accompanied by thunderous arpeggios in the piano. Here Tchaikovsky really does seem to be imagining a full orchestra as the music reaches new levels of intensity; and when the energy is finally spent, the theme fragments itself and disappears, accompanied by a quiet funeral march ostinato which simply fades away.