

History of the Russian Piano Trio • 3

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV CUI • BORODIN

The Brahms Trio



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Nikolay RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844–1908)

Piano Trio in C minor (1881) (completed 1939 by Maximilian Steinberg)

César CUI (1835–1918)

À Argenteau, Op. 40 – No. 2. Farniente in D major (1887) (version for piano trio)

Alexander BORODIN (1833–1887)

Piano Trio in D major (1860)

The influence of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) as composer and teacher was profound, and not only in Russia. His masterly grasp of orchestral technique, formed as much by his knowledge of the Western canon as the Russian, was admired by composers such as Debussy and Ravel, and was a formative influence on Stravinsky, who was his pupil – a work such as *The Firebird*, for example, would have been unthinkable without the precedent of Rimsky-Korsakov and the fairy-tale world he explored especially in his stage works.

While, then, Rimsky-Korsakov is much better known for his orchestral music and many operas, he was far from unproductive in other fields, including song, choral music and chamber music. Over the course of his life he produced, as well as a number of works for smaller forces, several pieces for string quartet, a string quintet and a string sextet and, in 1897, the *Piano Trio in C minor*. The *Trio*, however, remained incomplete, though the composer did do some further work on it. It was finally completed by his son-in-law, Maximilian Steinberg, himself a composer of distinction. Though, on the evidence of his autobiography, Rimsky-Korsakov appeared not to think very highly of the piece himself, and he would not allow it, or the *String Quartet in G major* to be published by Belaieff, Steinberg's completion reveals a substantial work of considerable depth, worthy of a place of honour in the long history of the Russian piano trio.

It begins with an impressive and lyrical *Allegro* in free sonata form, with three themes, the third being the first in reverse. The development section ends with a kind of brief folk dance, and the whole is capped by a sparkling coda. The second movement is also an *Allegro* and also in C minor, but of a very different character: it is a light-hearted

rondo, making much use of melodic chromaticism. It is followed by an *Adagio* in the remote key of A major. The opening, with its long held string notes and piano chords, is mysterious, and even menacing, but the music's character changes gradually to become more serenade-like and rhapsodic. The opening texture returns at the end. The *Finale*, in A minor, is structurally most original. It is begun by the piano, in fugal style, but the fugue is twice interrupted, first by the cello and then the violin, with recitatives (thus indicated in the score) before it is overtaken by a whirlwind *Allegro* in C minor. The opening fugal *Adagio* returns later, but the movement ends with a brief but glittering *Presto*.

Like Rimsky-Korsakov, the composer and critic César Cui (1835–1918) had a parallel career. Rimsky-Korsakov was an officer in the Russian navy, Cui in the army (indeed, this kind of situation was characteristic of a number of Russian composers in the 19th century). Born in Vilnius, in what is now Lithuania, Cui's upbringing was cosmopolitan and multilingual. His father was French, and Cui, like many other educated Russians of the time, maintained connections with francophone culture throughout his life.

Though Cui's often acid criticism is regularly mentioned and was important, his music is relatively little performed today, at least outside Russia. However, he was extremely prolific as a composer, in many genres. The brief *Farniente* is a charming and lyrical work, as light as a feather. It comes originally from a cycle of nine *Pièces caractéristiques* for piano published in 1887 with the title *À Argenteau*, and bearing a dedication to the Count and Countess of Mercy-Argenteau – Cui was a friend of the Countess, a skilled pianist, from 1885 to 1890, and spent time at her chateau in Belgium. The version for piano trio

amplifies the textures of the original very expertly, making it in some ways even more dream-like.

The final work on this recording, the *Piano Trio in D major* by Alexander Borodin (1833–1887), was first conceived in 1850, but only finished in 1860, while the composer was on a scientific tour of Europe – Borodin is another example of the Russian amateur composer. In his case he was a scientist, working specifically in organic chemistry. He later became professor of chemistry at the Imperial Medical-Surgical Academy in St Petersburg. While he was by no means as prolific as either Rimsky-Korsakov or Cui, Borodin's output was hardly insubstantial. His best-known works today are probably his first two symphonies (of the third there survive two movements) and his two string quartets. The latter demonstrate his very real gift for chamber music, of which the *Trio* is the earliest example.

The *Trio* remained unfinished (if there was a fourth movement it is long since lost), and was only published a hundred years after its inception. The work is really very reminiscent of Mendelssohn, as indeed is the *String Sextet*, also completed in 1860. One wonders whether a listener unfamiliar with the piece would in fact guess its author. It begins with a joyful and agile sonata-allegro with the indication *Allegro con brio*, in which the cello has a substantial role in the handling of the thematic material. This is followed by a song-like *Romance* of nostalgic beauty, suggestive of a Mendelssohnian song without words, and the third movement is entitled *Intermezzo*, with the further indication *Tempo di minuetto*, and is a spirited evocation of the dance of that name.

Ivan Moody

The Brahms Trio

The Brahms Trio is one of the leading Russian chamber ensembles, comprising violinist Nikolai Sachenko and cellist Kirill Rodin, both winners of the Gold Medal at the International Tchaikovsky Competition in Moscow, and pianist Natalia Rubinstein, First Prize winner of the Joseph Joachim Chamber Music Competition in Weimar and founder of the ensemble. Since its foundation in 1990, the trio has regularly appeared at prestigious international concert venues, such as the Grand Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, the Brucknerhaus Linz and Seoul Arts Center, as well as at festivals in Melbourne, Hong Kong, Istanbul, Copenhagen, Paris and London. Legendary musicians such as Tatiana Gaidamovich, Alexander Bonduriansky (Moscow Trio), Valentin Berlinsky (Borodin Quartet) and Rudolf Barshai have had a significant influence on the formation of the performing style and career of the trio. The Brahms Trio has made an invaluable contribution to enlarging the chamber repertoire by rediscovering unknown piano trios of Russian composers of the late 19th and early 20th century. The musicians of The Brahms Trio are professors at the Moscow State Tchaikovsky Conservatory, and are the recipients of the honorary title Honoured Artist of Russia. www.brahms-trio.ru



Photo by Emil Matveev

Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's influence as composer and teacher was profound in Russia and beyond, yet his chamber music has been overshadowed by his operas and orchestral works. The unfinished *Piano Trio in C minor* was completed by his son-in-law Maximilian Steinberg to reveal a substantial work of considerable depth. César Cui's charming and lyrical *Farniente* is an arrangement from a piano original, while Borodin's *Piano Trio in D major* is reminiscent of Mendelssohn in its joyous agility and nostalgic beauty.

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<p>Nikolay RIMSKY-KORSAKOV (1844–1908) Piano Trio in C minor (1897) (completed 1939 by Maximilian Steinberg [1883–1946])</p>	<p>César CUI (1835–1918) À Argenteau, Op. 40, No. 2 – Farniente in D major (Allegretto) (1887) (version for piano trio)*</p>
<p>1 I. Allegro 11:07 2 II. Allegro 4:40 3 III. Adagio 9:34 4 IV. Finale: Adagio – Allegro assai – Presto 15:18</p>	<p>5 5:54 Alexander BORODIN (1833–1887) Piano Trio in D major (1860) 21:55 6 I. Allegro con brio 6:20 7 II. Romance: Andante 8:07 8 III. Intermezzo: Tempo di minuetto 7:20</p>

* WORLD PREMIERE RECORDING

The Brahms Trio

Nikolai Sachenko, Violin • Kirill Rodin, Cello
Natalia Rubinstein, Piano

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