

Antonín Dvořák: Trio for Pianoforte, Violin, and Cello in E Minor (“Dumky”), Op. 90

1890 marked the beginning of a new era in Dvořák’s life. Between the months of February and October of that year, an unpleasant exchange of letters took place between Dvořák and his publisher, Fritz Simrock, who, refusing yet again to publish the composer’s Eighth Symphony (Op. 88), complained that he could not publish such large works and suggested that Dvořák write “small pieces.” Dvořák’s answer was simply “I have now all but great ideas in my mind; I will do what God bestows on me,” and shortly thereafter, he would (temporarily) end all relations with Simrock. Indeed, during the following years the composer’s actions reveal a great sense of freedom and courage for new endeavors — in January 1891, he assumed a teaching position at the Prague Conservatory, a job that he had repeatedly refused to accept prior to that point; in December of that same year, Dvořák signed a contract to serve as director of the National Conservatory in New York. This newly discovered freedom manifested itself even more prominently in his compositions; it allowed him to pursue the “paths that lead to the highest ends of the magnificent art” (as he writes in a letter to Hans Richter, dated October 16, 1890), without fear for the publisher’s or audience’s expectations. The first work Dvořák set out to write during this period was his Op. 90 Piano Trio, called the “Dumky,” which would become his last work for this combination of instruments.

The word *dumky* (plural of *dumka*) is derived from the verb *dumati*, shared by almost all Slavic languages, which translates to “meditate, ponder, brood; to think.” However, the true meaning of the word was unclear even to Dvořák, of whom it is said that after having already composed numerous pieces entitled “dumka” he met Ludvik Kuba, a collector of Slavonic folk-songs, in a coffee house and proceeded to ask “What is a *dumka*?” (Unfortunately, Kuba’s reply has not been recorded.) However, Dvořák’s interpretation of a *dumka* gradually emerged as a musical form pensive and melancholy in its basic mood, but interspersed with serene or cheerful sections, a definition that certainly applies to the Dumky Trio.

The piece opens with a bold theme outlining a tonic chord in first inversion, soon giving away to the secondary theme, a mournful melody that ascends and descends primarily in sixths. This secondary theme reappears in the second, quicker B section of this repeated binary form movement ($A - B - A - B$), but now in the parallel major and lighthearted in nature. Both sections are repeated with the voices switched among the instruments.

The second movement (in C \sharp minor) follows the same repeated binary form of the previous movement. Its opening is characterized by a monotonous, chordal accompaniment presented by the piano, on top of which enters a lamenting melody played by the cello, switching from minor to major and back. After a brief, warm interlude by the piano, the opening theme returns, again trying to change to and remain in major — again to no avail: the melody collapses, returning to minor and leading into the *vivace* B section of the movement, which climaxes in a fully diminished seventh chord. A cello cadenza leads into the repetition of the material, again with switched roles in the instruments.

A simple partial ascending scale provides the basic thematic material for the third movement, first in A major in the *andante*, then in the parallel minor in the *vivace* section. The form of this movement is basic ternary ($A - B - A$) with a short but beautifully reflective coda (including a G.P. during which time itself almost seems to stop).

The fourth movement expands on the previous movement’s form, turning it into an $A - B - A - B - A - C - A$ Coda pattern. As in the second movement, the fourth begins with several bars of a rhythmic accompanying pattern, played by the piano and the violin. The cello adds to this march-like figure an expressive melody consisting of largely step-wise motion. At the heart of the folk-dance-like

B sections lies a diminution of this melody, while the C section is marked by a rather jubilant *allegro*, characterized by horn-like three-note arpeggios alternating between the piano and the strings. A final, much calmer repetition of the A section brings the movement to an end.

Much of the fifth movement (which returns to a linear $A - B - C - A - B - C$ form) revolves around another simple scale like figure appearing both in ascending and descending form and in different variations. An interesting rhythmic feature appears between the B and C sections in the form of a temporary hemiola-like four-eight rhythm within the true six-eight meter. The movement's ending also bears a surprise: as it draws to a close, the music grows softer and softer, finally resting on a *pianissimo* E_b tonic chord; but just as the listener is about to accept yet another soft, quiet ending (the third in a row!), a final *fortissimo* outburst gives the movement an ending equal in excitement to its opening. It is also worth noting that this movement is the only one in the piece to start with a fast tempo and change to a slower tempo during the movement.

The final movement opens in C minor, with a rather dark melody in the piano accompanied by broad C minor chords in the strings. The secondary theme is introduced by the piano several bars later — at its core are four staccato notes, a figure that appears throughout the movement, which is structured in an $A - B - C - A - B - \text{Coda}$ pattern. Among the highlights of this movement are an expansion of the opening piano melody by the violin during the repetition of the A section, followed by another interpretation by the piano, much more unsettling in character due to a sixteen measure long tremolo in the cello. Yet another restatement of this theme in the coda, this time triumphantly in C major, leads into what appears to be a calm ending, but where one would expect the very final C major chord to enter, the harmony suddenly changes to minor, and an *accelerando* propels the movement and the piece to a furious *vivace* conclusion.

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