

THE LEIPZIG CIRCLE

Schumann, Gade & Mendelssohn

PHOENIX PIANO TRIO





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Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Piano Trio No. 2, in F major, Op. 80

| | | | |
|---|-----|--------------------------------|------|
| 1 | i | Sehr lebhaft | 7'28 |
| 2 | ii | Mit innigem Ausdruck – Lebhaft | 8'31 |
| 3 | iii | In mässiger Bewegung | 5'10 |
| 4 | iv | Nicht zu rasch | 5'33 |

Niels Gade (1817-1890)

Novelletten, Op. 29

| | | | |
|---|-----|--------------------|------|
| 5 | i | Allegro scherzando | 2'49 |
| 6 | ii | Andantino con moto | 4'19 |
| 7 | iii | Moderato | 2'25 |
| 8 | iv | Larghetto con moto | 3'18 |
| 9 | v | Finale. Allegro | 4'04 |

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Piano Trio No. 2, in C minor, Op. 66

| | | | |
|----|-----|-------------------------------------|-------|
| 10 | i | Allegro energico e con fuoco | 10'46 |
| 11 | ii | Andante espressivo | 7'04 |
| 12 | iii | Scherzo: Molto allegro quasi presto | 3'35 |
| 13 | iv | Finale: Allegro appassionato | 7'53 |

72'55

PHOENIX PIANO TRIO

Jonathan Stone *violin*

Christian Elliott *cello*

Sholto Kynoch *piano*

THE PHOENIX PIANO TRIO

The **Phoenix Piano Trio** is established as one of today's leading ensembles, bringing together three individually renowned players and praised for performances with a 'musical narrative of tremendous, involving depth' (Strings Magazine, USA) and 'unbuttoned exuberance' (Financial Times). They have performed at London's Wigmore Hall, at the Ryedale Festival, the Killaloe Festival in Ireland, the Songmakers festival in Sheffield with soprano Joan Rodgers, the British Music Society in York, the Happy Days Festival in Eniskillen, the Leicester International Music Festival, and the London Chamber Music Society at Kings Place. They have recorded Cheryl Frances-Hoad's *The Forgiveness Machine* for the Champs Hill label and Philip Venables' *Klaviertrio im Geiste* for NMC (both works commissioned by the Phoenix Piano Trio).

Violinist **Jonathan Stone** is an internationally acclaimed chamber musician, soloist, concertmaster and director. Jonathan was a member of the Doric String Quartet for 13 years, with whom he recorded 16 discs for Chandos Records. He is leader of the French orchestra Le Cercle de l'Harmonie.

Christian Elliott was appointed Principal Cellist of the Irish Chamber Orchestra in 2016, and is a member of the Zehetmair Quartet, with whom he has appeared at Europe's most prestigious venues and music festivals. Also a composer, he has been commissioned by cellist Steven Isserlis, the Françoise-Green Piano Duo, and violist Ruth Killius.

Sholto Kynoch is a sought-after pianist who specialises in chamber music and song accompaniment. In addition to a busy performance schedule and a fast-growing discography, he is the founder and Artistic Director of the Oxford Lieder Festival. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music in the RAM's 2018 honours.

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Travelling back from Berlin to Dresden in March 1847, Robert Schumann passed through Leipzig, his home until the end of 1844. 'Met Mendelssohn and Gade – the old Leipzig friends', he recorded in his diary. It would be the last time he saw Mendelssohn, whose friendship and musical advice he had cherished since their first meeting in 1835. Each man had championed the other's music, Schumann in print (famously hailing Mendelssohn as 'the Mozart of the nineteenth century'), Mendelssohn as pianist and conductor, most recently of Schumann's Second Symphony. After Mendelssohn's shockingly premature death Schumann drafted a memoir in which he celebrated not only his friend's prodigious musical gifts but also his artistic integrity.

In that memoir Schumann noted, laconically, that Mendelssohn 'liked Gade, both when he spoke and when he was silent'. Trained as a violinist, the young Niels Gade had journeyed from his native Copenhagen to Leipzig in 1843, after Mendelssohn had conducted the premiere of his First Symphony in March. In an article in his *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*, Schumann praised the symphony's 'utterly original melodic idiom' and 'technical mastery'. Mendelssohn quickly took him under his wing, making him his deputy as conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus concerts and securing him a teaching post at the Leipzig Academy of Music. Schumann maintained a friendship with Gade after he and Clara moved to Dresden. When the younger man visited them in 1846, Robert commented approvingly in his diary, 'He loves playing with children' – an accolade indeed from a man who was never happier than in the company of his own children. Schumann later wove Gade's name into 'Northern Song' from his *Album für die Jugend*, noting that 'the four letters of his name are those of the open strings of the violin'. Gade was evidently born to be a composer.

On Mendelssohn's death in November 1847 Gade was his natural successor as conductor of the Gewandhaus. But when war broke out between Denmark and Prussia over Schleswig-Holstein the following year he returned to Copenhagen and became the leading figure in the city's musical life. Gade continued to compose prolifically in all the major genres except opera, though by the 1870s his idiom – which might be summed up as Schumann-

Mendelssohn plus a dash of Nordic asperity – was viewed as tamely conservative in an age intoxicated by Wagner.

Robert Schumann seems to have invented the term *Novelletten* for his cycle of eight piano pieces, Op. 21. Gade then adopted the title – albeit without Schumann's hidden messages – for five miniatures for piano trio he composed in Copenhagen in 1853. In the opening A minor *Allegro scherzando*, the hammering repeated quavers (shades here of Schubert) soon take on a more genial cast, and later underpin a lyrical violin theme in the remote key of D flat. Next comes a mellow and, it's tempting to add, Schumannesque *Andante con moto* in E major, with a beautifully fluid interweaving of keyboard and strings. Written against the background of a gavotte, the third of the *Novelletten* (Moderato) alternates a boisterous dance in A minor with a gentler A major episode that finally evaporates into thin air.

The fourth piece (*Larghetto con moto*) is a song without words in a comfortably swaying barcarolle rhythm. Could Gade have been thinking here of the Andante of Mendelssohn's C minor Trio? One charming touch is the way the main key, F major, is approached obliquely, via B flat. Back in A minor, the impetuous final *Allegro* brings the *Novelletten* full circle by softly reintroducing the first movement's 'hammering' motif just before the close.

Schumann had first plunged into the medium of chamber music in 1842, when in a typical burst of creative enthusiasm he produced three string quartets, the Piano Quintet and Piano Quartet. Five years later, amid work on his opera *Genoveva*, he returned to chamber music with two piano trios, spurred by the success of Mendelssohn's trios and, not least, by the example of Clara's recent G minor Trio (Clara had got in first with her A minor Piano Concerto, too!) Composed during the summer and autumn of 1847, Schumann's first two trios make a sharply contrasted pair. On his own admission, the troubled D minor Trio, Op. 63, was conceived amid 'dark moods', whereas its F major companion, Op. 80, completed at the end of October, 'makes a friendlier and more immediate impression'. Franz Liszt was an early admirer of the trio when Clara and two string-playing friends performed it in their Dresden home in December 1848.

Living up to its billing 'Sehr lebhaft' (very lively), the first movement, in a bounding 6/8 metre, is Schumann at his most euphoric – the extrovert Florestan in his own private mythology. It is also tightly unified. The second theme, while apparently new, turns out to be a calmer, simplified variant of the chromatically unstable opening. At the start of the development Schumann introduces the yearning opening phrase of the song 'Intermezzo' from the Eichendorff *Liederkreis*, Op. 39 – which he had described to Clara as 'my most romantic music ever, with much of you in it' – then creates an intricate web of counterpoint from a spiky staccato figure first heard near the opening. The 'Intermezzo' quotation is typical of a composer who loved to incorporate private messages even in his ostensibly abstract works.

There is another, more oblique allusion to this song in the theme of the slow movement, set in the deep, veiled key of D flat major. This is Eusebius the dreamer, the antithesis of Schumann's fictional Florestan. Beneath this rapt violin melody, piano and cello are locked in a strict yet unobtrusive canon that rises chromatically: another example of the contrapuntal mastery that the composer had honed in his recent studies of Bach. In the course of the movement Schumann twice ups the tempo ('Lebhaft') and transforms the main theme into a playful quasi-scherzo.

After this, Schumann evidently decided that a scherzo third movement would be redundant. Instead he writes a melancholy, syncopated waltz in B flat minor with piano and cello, then piano and violin, again in canonic imitation. (Perhaps Schumann was remembering the canonic scherzo in Schubert's E flat Piano Trio, a favourite work of his.) There is a flowing central trio in the major key, and – a characteristically Schumannesque touch – a ghostly echo of the trio's opening in the coda. Brahms surely admired this haunting, twilight movement.

In another thematic reminiscence, the sinuous main theme of the finale recalls the shape of the waltz's trio. Schumann here recaptures the joyous spirit of the first movement, with an added element of playful banter in the ubiquitous imitative counterpoint (he was evidently dreaming in canon at this stage of his career). The upshot is an exhilarating conclusion to one of Schumann's most lovable and structurally satisfying chamber works.

By the early 1840s Mendelssohn's unremitting activities as composer, pianist, administrator and conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus had taken their toll. A note of weariness and satiety creeps into his letters; and despite his happy, tranquil marriage to Cécile Jeanrenaud, daughter of a Frankfurt pastor, he seems to have suffered increasingly from depression. Yet he continued to compose prolifically to the end. Instrumental masterpieces from the 1840s include the Violin Concerto, the String Quintet in B flat, and the C minor Piano Trio, completed in April 1845 and dedicated to fellow-composer Louis Spohr. All three works – and to them one could add the tragic F minor Quartet, Op. 80 – triumphantly refute the clichéd notion that Mendelssohn's genius declined irredeemably after the brilliance of youth.

Composed when Mendelssohn was already in weakening health, the C minor Trio has never been as popular as the D minor of 1839, perhaps because it lacks the earlier trio's instant melodic appeal. Yet in its outer movements, at least, it is at least as fine as its companion. From its smouldering, swirling opening theme, intoned *pianissimo* by the keyboard in bare octaves over a deep cello pedal and repeated by the strings, the first movement is one of the most impassioned and tightly knit that Mendelssohn ever wrote. A fervent contrasting theme surges in *fortissimo* out of the first climax - a thrilling moment - before subsiding in lyrical meditation. The inspired coda begins in Brahmsian mystery and ends, after a torrential crescendo, in Beethovenian vehemence, with strings playing the opening theme at half speed in counterpoint with the piano.

The central movements, both examples of familiar Mendelssohnian types, provide necessary emotional respite. The Andante is a dreamy song-without-words that suggests a gently gliding barcarolle. Animated by darting, flickering string-keyboard exchanges, the third movement is the last of the 'fairy' scherzos that Mendelssohn first made his own in the Octet. Its gossamer textures are constantly enlivened by his nonchalant contrapuntal dexterity; and like all good fairy scherzos, it vanishes into the ether. With some understatement, Mendelssohn informed his sister Fanny that this captivating movement was 'rather fiendish to play'.

The finale is an original fusion of ancient and modern, and a reminder that Mendelssohn was a leading figure in the nineteenth-century Bach revival. Initiated by a leaping, angular cello theme that could almost be a Bachian gigue (and which Brahms remembered in the scherzo of his F minor Piano Sonata, Op. 5), it effortlessly integrates a serene chorale melody into the turbulent musical narrative. (Derived from two traditional Lutheran hymns, the chorale will inevitably remind Anglophone listeners of 'The Old Hundredth', sung to the words 'All people that on earth do dwell.')

In the C major coda Mendelssohn combines the gigue and the chorale, thundered out by the strings against piano tremolos, to create a majestic, orchestral-style apotheosis.

On 31 October 1847 Niels Gade visited the Schumanns in Dresden with the news that Mendelssohn was seriously ill in Leipzig. The following day Schumann went to hear a performance of his friend's *Elijah*. Then, on 5 November, came the news that Mendelssohn had died the previous night after a series of strokes, aged just thirty-eight. Schumann and Gade were both pall bearers at his funeral. The service ended, aptly, with the final chorus of Bach's St Matthew Passion, the work which the twenty-year-old Mendelssohn had 'given back to the world' in 1829.

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