

Boston Trio's return to Arts in the Village an emotional triumph

By Keith Powers, Contributing Writer

Posted at 3:01 AM

Feeling bad shouldn't sound so good.

The deeply elegiac piano trios of Smetana and Dvorak draw their power from the composers' personal tragedies. Like any emotional works, they need accomplished practitioners to bring that anguish to life.

Enter the Boston Trio, performing with passionate commitment last Saturday evening at Goff Memorial Hall in Rehoboth, part of the Arts in the Village chamber music series. The trio — Heng-Jin Park, piano; Jonah Ellsworth, cello; and Irina Muresanu, violin — was returning after several previous engagements on the Arts in the Village series, to a sold-out house.

Any program with just two works would hardly seem a model of variety. But in just seven movements, all told, the trio explored not only ideas of loss and sorrow, but the seemingly contradictory human emotions that accompany those feelings.

Smetana had a hard life. The Czech composer had finally found stability with a regular teaching job, a marriage, and the birth of young children. But three of those children died at a young age, most notably his favorite daughter, Fritzi, at age 4.

Smetana's letters achingly tell the story of his first great musical success, the performance of his Festive Symphony, and how Fritzi stood through the entire concert, listening intently. She would be dead of scarlet fever just a few months later.

Which devastated the composer. The sorrow got channeled into this G minor trio, not simply as grief — but as a complete exploration of the prospects, ambitions and joy that get swept away by such a loss.

It's a lengthy, tightly wound work in three movements — beautifully constructed. Muresanu carved out the opening melody — a chromatic, dotted line that would return hauntingly. Multiple ideas develop, and eventually a unique gesture — rapid staccato bowing in unison between Ellsworth and Muresanu — leads to a cadenza-like passage in the piano, a tender interlude. The feeling was mournful, to be sure, but ecstatic as well.

The scherzo surprises in both form and ideas. Instead of the usual — introduction, trio middle section, and return to the original introduction — this scherzo presents two trios, as if the composer could not make up his mind. The first trio — beautifully drawn out in the violin, then passed to the cello — sounds anachronistically like a Broadway tune. The second, much sturdier, is a march, forcefully bowed in unison strings.

The final movement is another wonder. It sets up a galloping rhythm — no listener in Smetana's time would think of anything except Schubert's song "Erlkönig," with its father and son on horseback, trying to outrace death. The galloping beat gets upset by a second rhythm in the piano part — much of the movement sets two beats against three — and the topsy-turvy effect adds to the overall incongruence of the emotions.

The playing was uniformly superb. The trio has had several seasons to coalesce in this personnel grouping, and it shows in facile communication and insightful phrasing.

Dvorak's F minor trio may serve as a musical acknowledgement of his mother, who had died in the months just prior to its composition. Whatever the motivation, this trio stands out even among Dvorak's many great chamber works. As dense as Smetana's trio is, Dvorak's is even more crowded with ideas.

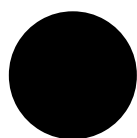
No summary does this mountain of music justice. Dvorak's scherzo — the second movement — also stands out formally: rather than a simple repeat of the opening section, the composer re-writes it subtly, turning the triplets into a much more forceful figure.

The centerpiece is the Adagio third movement. Ellsworth opened it with a delicate solo, taken up by Muresanu. Different melodies weave in, some incongruous school-yard ideas, some noble and sweeping. The apex: Muresanu's high-register solo, intensely performed.

The finale teases. It sets up yet another musical idea, and seems to be bringing it to a rousing conclusion. But just at that moment, it stops. A theme from the first movement returns, as a sorrowful reminder.

Again it starts up, and again it stops — the Adagio theme returns. Finally Dvorak relents, and the work — and this terrific performance — came to a close.

The next Arts in the Village performance will feature Adrian Daurov, cello and Spencer Myer, piano, on March 24. For tickets and information visit www.rehobothantiquarian.org or call 508-463-5384.



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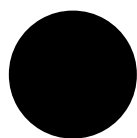
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