

# THE OBERLIN TRIO



DVOŘÁK

SHOSTAKOVICH

TOWER

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DAVID BOWLIN, violin AMIR ELDAN, cello HAEWON SONG, piano

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH (1906-75)

**Piano Trio No. 2 in E Minor, Op. 67** (1944)

- 1 Andante ..... 7:33
- 2 Allegro con brio ..... 2:58
- 3 Largo ..... 5:47
- 4 Allegretto ..... 10:17

JOAN TOWER (b. 1938)

- 5 **Big Sky** (2000) ..... 7:00

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK (1841-1904)

**Piano Trio No. 4 in E Minor, Op. 90, “Dumky”** (1891)

- 6 Lento maestoso ..... 4:19
- 7 Poco adagio ..... 7:18
- 8 Andante ..... 6:39
- 9 Andante moderato ..... 5:07
- 10 Allegro ..... 4:11
- 11 Lento maestoso ..... 4:37

Total: 65:45

Each piece on this recording is a deeply personal statement from its composer. Dmitri Shostakovich’s Trio No. 2 is a compelling tale of human endurance and tragedy, which he experienced in his personal life and as a composer working under oppressive conditions in Soviet Russia. Joan Tower’s *Big Sky* was inspired by childhood memories of horseback riding in the valley of La Paz, Bolivia. For Antonín Dvořák, in no work does the influence of the pan-Slavic folk music of his native Bohemia reach such heights as in his “Dumky” trio: six passionate and spirited dance movements in which exuberance and melancholy effortlessly intermingle.

—David, Amir, and Haewon



Violinist **DAVID BOWLIN** is renowned as a passionate interpreter of a broad range of repertoire. His playing has been called “brilliant” by *The New York Times* and “formidable” by *The Chicago Sun-Times*. First-prize winner at the 2003 Washington International Competition, Bowlin is a former member of the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players and a founding member of the visionary International Contemporary Ensemble, and he has toured extensively with Musicians from Marlboro. A prolific recording artist, he can be heard on recordings of works by more than a dozen composers on the Bridge, Naxos, New Focus, Arsis, New Albany, and Mode labels, among others. His most recent release is a 2014 Oberlin Music CD of concertos and solo works by Huang Ruo and Luciano Berio. Bowlin has performed as concertmaster with the Toronto Symphony and the IRIS Chamber Orchestra, and he has been a featured chamber musician at many festivals, including Mostly Mozart, Kneisel Hall, Bridgehampton, Chesapeake, and ChamberFest Cleveland. He has given master classes across the United States and internationally, including the Central Conservatory in Beijing, Seoul National University, and the Conservatorio de las Rosas in Morelia, Mexico.



Cellist **AMIR ELDAN** has cultivated a performing career as notable for its breadth as its excellence. At age 22, he was named associate principal cellist of the Met Opera Orchestra—the orchestra’s youngest member—and became a member of the Met’s Chamber Ensemble at the invitation of James Levine. He has also served as principal cellist of the Israel Philharmonic, by invitation from Zubin Mehta, and as guest principal of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra. Eldan made his New York debut with the Brahms Double Concerto in Alice Tully Hall and has presented recitals of the six Bach Solo Suites around the U.S. and Israel. Equally in demand as a chamber musician, he has collaborated with members of the Cleveland, Guarneri, and Juilliard string quartets as well as the Beaux Arts Trio, pianist Richard Goode, and cellists Lynn Harrell and Steven Isserlis. He has toured with Musicians from Marlboro and has taught and performed at Bowdoin, Indiana University String Academy, Giverny (France), West Cork (Ireland), and Pilsen (Czech Republic). Eldan was appointed to the faculty of the Oberlin Conservatory in 2006 and now serves as director of the strings division. His performances have been featured on public television and radio in the U.S., Europe, and in Israel.



Pianist **HAEWON SONG** performs in celebrated venues throughout the world, including concerto appearances with the KBS Orchestra (Seoul), Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and the Cleveland Chamber Symphony, as well as festival performances in Mexico, Germany, Canada, France, Taiwan, and the United States. In addition to performing with the Oberlin Trio, Song makes regular concert tours of South Korea and is a frequent performer in duo piano recitals with her husband, Robert Shannon. Their recording of George Crumb's *Celestial Mechanics* (Bridge Records) received wide critical acclaim and was hailed as a “wonderfully buoyant and rhythmic performance” by *Classics Today*. In 2014, Song was named to the Steinway Artist roster. She attended the Toho School (Tokyo) and earned bachelor's and master's degrees from the Juilliard School, where her major teachers were Julian Martin, Martin Canin, and Shuku Iwasaki. Her students have won top prizes in major competitions including the Widemann, MTNA National, Kingsville, Walgreen, World, and Corpus Christi.

## PIANO TRIO NO. 2 IN E MINOR, OP. 67 (1944)

**Dmitri Shostakovich** (1906-75)

Decades after his death and the demise of the Soviet Union, Shostakovich is still viewed, more often than not, through a political lens. It is true that the Russian composer, 11 years old at the time of the Bolshevik Revolution, knew no other political reality than the Communist regime, with which he had an extremely complex relationship. Lionized by the party one day and severely censured the next (and then lionized and censured all over again), Shostakovich was rumored to keep a suitcase with a change of clothes under his bed for years, in case they would arrest him in the middle of the night—an instance that never came to pass. By the time his position became unassailably secure in the 1960s, his health had given out, and during the last decade of his life he was constantly in and out of hospitals and sanatoriums.

Yet politics are far from being the only possible frame of reference for a discussion of Shostakovich. One of the giants of 20th-century music in general, he possessed an unmistakable personal style and was one of a handful of composers who were able to breathe new life into traditional genres like the symphony, the string quartet, or the piano trio, innovating “from within,” as it were. He catapulted to fame at age 19 when his First Symphony—his conservatory graduation piece—became an international sensation. During a career that spanned half a century, he completed almost 150 works, including two operas, 15 symphonies, six concertos, and 15

string quartets. He was also an outstanding pianist (until his deteriorating health forced him to give up performing) and a dedicated teacher who is remembered by his students as a supportive mentor and an inexhaustible source of life-changing inspiration.

Russian composers had a tradition of commemorating the departed with piano trios: Tchaikovsky wrote his trio in memory of Nikolai Rubinstein, Rachmaninoff composed his *Trio élégiaque* in memory of Tchaikovsky, and Anton Arensky’s celebrated trio commemorates the cellist Karl Davydov. Shostakovich might have been thinking about these antecedents when, upon learning of the death of his best friend, Ivan Ivanovich Sollertinsky, he turned to the piano trio. (He had already written one trio in his youth, a brief essay in a post-Romantic style.) Four years Shostakovich’s senior, Sollertinsky was a musicologist who had introduced the composer to many masterpieces, and the symphonies of Mahler in particular. Sollertinsky died of a heart attack in February 1944 at the age of 42. “I have no words with which to express the pain that racks my entire being,” a devastated Shostakovich wrote to their mutual friend, Isaak Glikman.

In fact, Shostakovich had made sketches for a piano trio in 1943, but these were not used in the work we know today. The E-minor trio took what for Shostakovich was an unusually long time to write: He spent much of the spring on the first movement alone, completing the other three during the summer, at the retreat of the Union of Soviet Composers in the village of Ivanovo.

Unlike the Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff trios, Shostakovich's work adheres to the classical four-movement structure (as does the Arensky trio). This layout allowed the composer to write music in many different moods, paying tribute to Sollertinsky's complex personality. The trio moves from a sad and mysterious opening to a wild and ferocious scherzo, and from there to a lament in the form of a passacaglia, followed by the "Jewish" finale.

The cello opens the work with a theme played all in harmonics in an extremely high register. This eerie music, which seems to come from a great distance, later gives way to some angry and powerful outbursts. The second-movement scherzo seems to allude to Sollertinsky's sense of humor and the many happy moments the two friends had shared. The slow passacaglia (set of variations over an unchanging bass line) is somber and mournful; it is followed without pause by the dance finale. However, this is obviously not a happy ending. Much of the material is distorted klezmer (Jewish folk music), where the cheerful rhythms are combined with painfully dissonant intervals in the melody. It is no coincidence that Shostakovich started to be drawn to Jewish music during the years of World War II and the Holocaust. One of Shostakovich's favorite composition students, Veniamin Fleischman, had died in 1941 during the siege of Leningrad. Shostakovich was so fond of Fleischman that he decided to complete an unfinished opera—*Rothschild's Violin*, after a short story by Chekhov—that his student had left behind. The memory of Fleischman probably played a role in the shaping of the finale, in which the Jewish dance melodies sometimes take on a positively tragic tone.

Reminiscences of the earlier movements make the emotional content of the work even more ambivalent, and nothing seems to be resolved when the trio ends with a few broken chords and other isolated musical gestures.

Shostakovich himself played the piano part when the trio received its world premiere in Leningrad on November 14, 1944. His colleagues were Dmitri Zyganov (violin) and Sergei Shirinsky (cello) of the Beethoven Quartet.

—Peter Laki

## **BIG SKY** (2000)

### **Joan Tower** (b. 1938)

Tower is widely regarded as one of the most important American composers living today. During a career spanning more than 50 years, she has made lasting contributions to musical life in the United States as a composer, performer, conductor, and educator. Her works have been commissioned by major ensembles, soloists, and orchestras, including the Emerson, Tokyo, and Muir quartets; soloists Evelyn Glennie, Carol Wincenc, David Shifrin, and John Browning; and the orchestras of Chicago, New York, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C., among others. She co-founded the Naumburg Award-winning Da Capo Chamber Players and served as its pianist from 1970-85. Tower was the first composer chosen for a Ford *Made in America* consortium commission of 65 orchestras. Leonard Slatkin and the Nashville Symphony recorded *Made in America* in 2008 (along with *Tambor* and *Concerto for Orchestra*). The album collected Grammy Awards for Best Classical

Contemporary Composition, Best Classical Album, and Best Orchestral Performance. In 1990, Tower became the first woman to win the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for *Silver Ladders*, a piece she wrote for the St. Louis Symphony, with which she was composer in residence from 1985-88. Other residencies with orchestras include a 10-year residency with the Orchestra of St. Luke's (1997-2007) and the Pittsburgh Symphony (2010-11). She was the Albany Symphony's mentor composer partner in the 2013-14 season.

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*Big Sky* was commissioned by the La Jolla Chamber Music Society for its "SummerFest La Jolla 2000" music festival and dedicated to David Finckel and Wu Han. This slow, seven-minute trio for violin, cello, and piano was intended as a companion piece to a short and fast trio entitled *And . . . They're Off* (which was commissioned by the Scotia Festival in Canada, where I served as composer/conductor in residence in 1996). The common subject of these two works is horses—namely race horses. As a young girl, and like many young girls, I had an obsession with horses. When I was growing up in South America, my father bought me a race horse. This was in Bolivia, where horses—even race horses—were very cheap. I loved this horse and took very good care of it in our makeshift garage/stable. My obsession with horses continued into my teens, when I learned to jump. More recently (and many years later), I found a partner whose main love is *playing* the horses!

*Big Sky* is a piece based on a memory of riding my horse Aymara around in the deep valley of La Paz, Bolivia. It was surrounded by the huge and high Andes Mountains, and as I rode I looked into a vast and enormous sky. It was very peaceful and extraordinarily beautiful. We never went over one of these mountains, but if we had, it might have felt like what I wrote in this piece.

—Joan Tower

### PIANO TRIO NO. 4 IN E MINOR, OP. 90, "DUMKY" (1891)

**Antonín Dvořák** (1841-1904)

Dvořák is still frequently categorized as a "nationalist" composer, because he came from what was then an oppressed minority within the Habsburg empire, fighting for political and cultural recognition. This historical background is important to understand Dvořák, whose music was for many years the Czech lands' primary passport to the world. Yet although the author of the "New World" Symphony liked to refer to himself modestly as a "humble Czech *musikant* [village musician]," he was much more than a local phenomenon. As a writer of symphonies and chamber music, he is on a par with his friend Brahms, and while he frequently makes use of Czech folk music in his works, he by no means does so all the time. He is, quite simply, one of the greatest composers in the second half of the 19th century, regardless of nationality.

Dvořák was always considered something of a "provincial" in the imperial capital of Vienna; yet he enjoyed great success in England, and in 1891, he was invited to New York to become the founding director of the American

Conservatory of Music. He, his wife Anna, and their six children lived in the United States until 1894. By bestowing these honors on the composer, the musical world recognized impeccable craftsmanship combined with profound inspiration, as well as a unique artistic personality that was not immune to tragic moods but was essentially optimistic, unlike many of his contemporaries. Dvořák's Eighth (1889) is probably the happiest symphony written during the decadent *fin de siècle* ("end of the century").

During Dvořák's time, the Austro-German musical scene was dominated by long and intense debates. On one side stood the "New German school" of Wagner and Liszt, who advocated "program music"—that is, music inspired by literary works, philosophical ideas, and other extra-musical stimuli. On the other were the followers of Brahms, to whom music was "absolute" and referring only to itself. Dvořák, though a friend and ally of Brahms, went through a Wagnerian phase as well and, after finishing his nine symphonies, composed a set of symphonic poems along programmatic lines. He refused to be pigeonholed, either as a nationalist, a follower of the "New Germans," or a "Brahmin" (as Brahms' disciples were jokingly called). He was a national hero in his home country, but his death in 1904 was mourned by musicians everywhere.

In the "Dumky" trio, Dvořák was more strongly and more exclusively influenced by folk music than in any of his other major works. That inspiration, however, did much more than simply provide "local color," or affirming and celebrating the composer's national identity. In fact, it brought forth one of the most profound artistic utterances in Dvořák's entire output.

The name *dumka* comes from Ukrainian folk music, where it stands for a certain type of song with a nostalgic, elegiac character. Dvořák had a longstanding interest in the music of other Slavic nations; during his lifetime, the "pan-Slavic" movement, which promoted the brotherhood of all nationalities belonging to that linguistic family, was gaining ground in Dvořák's native Bohemia. Yet the composer did not use any original *dumka* melodies. He preferred to invent his own and had first done so in a solo piano work as early as 1876. *Dumkas* served as slow movements in several of Dvořák's chamber compositions, the most famous example being the Piano Quintet, Op. 81.

The idea of stringing together six *dumkas* to form a piano trio was a rather novel one, as the traditional four-movement scheme (opening-slow-scherzo-finale) seemed inalterable in 19th-century chamber music. Yet here it is, a suite of six movements, all of which, at least nominally, have the same general character. How is it possible to avoid monotony in such a work?

Dvořák achieved a real tour de force with this most unusual formal plan, as audiences unanimously agreed as soon as the new work was introduced in Prague on April 11, 1891. Violinist Ferdinand Lachner and cellist Hanuš Wihan, with the composer at the piano, took the piece on tour throughout the Czech lands and played it more than 30 times in five months.

Each of the six *dumkas* incorporates a contrast between slower and faster tempos, the former often coming across as sad and the latter as cheerful; the contrasts tend to involve changes between the major and minor modes

as well. But there are innumerable shades and gradations between those emotional states in the music, just as there are in life. And this is what creates great diversity in Dvořák's trio. Each movement represents a different personality, or rather, if we consider the fast and slow parts separately as we should, a different *pair* of personalities. The keys are also different from movement to movement (E minor/major, C-sharp minor, A major/minor, D minor-major, E-flat major, and C minor, respectively); therefore, it is not correct to refer to the entire work as the "Trio in E Minor," as is frequently done.

The first movement juxtaposes a certain majestic pathos with a wild, syncopated dance. In the second, a melancholy adagio alternates with a lighthearted melody that stays in the minor mode and gradually takes on a *furioso* character. In the third, the slow theme is in the major and the fast one in the minor—not the other way around as before. The expressive cello melody of No. 4 continues with a playful *scherzando*. In No. 5, both the tempo and the key relationships are reversed: A passionate melody in a major key is followed by a dreamy, quasi-recitative episode in the minor. The biggest surprise, however, comes in the last *dumka*, scored in an unremittingly tragic C minor. Its slow melody is perhaps the most poignant of all, and the fast theme ends the work with breathtaking dramatic force, without the slightest relief from the accumulated tensions.

—*Peter Laki*

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